

## **The Church as a Place and Instrument for Reconciliation and Peace-building**

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### **Abstract**

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*Being a sign and instrument of God's intention and plan in the world, the Church is called to play a prophetic role and exercise the ministry of reconciliation that has been entrusted to it by the Lord Jesus Christ. Because of its trustworthy nature, the Church is identified to be a place and also an instrument of reconciliation. The role of the Church goes beyond the reconciliation of sinner and God through Jesus Christ. It addresses reconciliation more broadly in society. The critical role of the Church is also ensuring that voices of voiceless reverberate in the hall of public policies. The church's initiative for reconciliation should be anchored on the concept that peace is the tranquillity that flows from right order mutual understanding between its members and with the environment.*

**Key words:** *church, place, role, instrument. Reconciliation peace-building*

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### **Introduction**

The Church is a communion of those who by means of their encounter with the Word, stand in a living relationship with God who speaks to them and calls forth their trustful response.<sup>51</sup> It is also known as being the communion of the faithful. The Church is a gift of God; as such, it is a divine reality made up of the finite persons who are sinful and redeemed, it is a human reality as well. The New Testament does not give us a systematic theology of the Church, but offers up a host of metaphors and images that try to evoke the reality of the Church, at once both earthly and transcendent. There are many images of the church in the Bible, but we will mention just three: the church as the Body of Christ, the People of God and the Bride of Christ. Christ is the head of the church (Ephesians 1:10; 4:15) and Christians are the body. "People of God" is another image of the church. God says of the church, "I will be their God, and they will be my people" (2 Corinthians 6:16; Hebrews 8:10 NIV). The church is also referred to as the Bride of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:32; Revelation 19:7; 21:9), suggestive of a special and sacred family relationship between Christ and the church. The Church is also the manifestation of the kingdom or reign of God. It is the form

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<sup>51</sup> Faith and Order Commission, 'The Nature and Mission of the Church. A Stage on the Way to a common Statement'. Faith and Order Paper no. 198; published in 2005.

which that reign takes on earth in our time. It is the concrete of God's sovereign rule in our heart.<sup>52</sup>

The Church is a sign and instrument of God's intention and plan for the whole World. It is meant to be a prophetic sign, pointing beyond itself to the *mission dei*, to what God is doing in the world. As an instrument of God, the church exercises the ministry of reconciliation that has been entrusted to it by God in Christ.<sup>53</sup> The church as an institution is challenged by what is happening in society. Current challenges in Africa and in other parts of the world have already affected the lives of those who attend church services.<sup>54</sup> Paul gives great attention to ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church, in his letter to the Ephesians. In fact, we could say Ephesians answered this question: What is the church? In Ephesians 2:19–22, the chief metaphor Paul uses is that of a building—the household of God. Christians are part of the household in the sense that they have been adopted into the family of God, which is another image that Scripture uses to describe the church.

### **The Church as a Place and Instrument of Reconciliation**

Reconciliation is broadly considered by policy makers, practitioners, and academics alike as a process centrally needed in societies emerging from violent conflicts.<sup>55</sup> Because reconciliation is part of a long process, one should not necessarily expect it to be the end point of conflict. But all analysis concurs that no intractable conflict can really end without some kind of reconciliation if the parties to the conflict are going to interact again in the future. The issue of trust is central to the idea of transforming relationships. In the deep-rooted conflicts where the parties are not simply disputing over material interests but are suffering from deeply damaged social relationships, rebuilding trust is a key step towards resolution and transformation. The church as a trustworthy institution is well identified to be such place and also instrument of reconciliation. This is the case of the intervention of the church in places such as Algeria, South Sudan and Mozambique as Zarteman and Touval assert:

Unofficial mediation in Africa provides a good illustration. Textbook cases of mediation were effected by the World Council of Churches and the All Africa Conference of Churches in the southern Sudanese civil war in 1972, and the Community of Sant' Sgidio in Mozambique in 1990-92 and Algeria after 1994. The church bodies widened

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<sup>52</sup> Erickson, Millard. *Christian Theology*, p.1042

<sup>53</sup> WCC. 2011. *Initial Statement Towards an Ecumenical Declaration on Just Peace*, p.11.

<sup>54</sup> J.N.K. Mugambi. 1997. *The Church and the Future in Africa*, p.5.

<sup>55</sup> Judy Barsalou. 2005. *Trauma and Transitional Justice in Divided Societies*, p. .2.

the perceptions of opportunity among the parties and persuaded them to move to resolution. The mediators were not unbiased having closer ties with the Southern Sudanese and Mozambican rebels than with the government, and they were not without means of leverage, being able to threaten a resumption of supplies if the government broke talks, in Algeria, all they could offer was a venue and encouragement.<sup>56</sup>

Also Sengulane and Goncalves reported that Mozambique's churches facilitated to bring about direct discussions between the Frelimo government and the Renamo that led to the official ending of the war in 1992. They describe how, regardless of the historical tension between the clergy's association with Portuguese colonialists and nationalist ambitions, a resurgent church advocated dialogue and reconciliation, and based on a position of neutrality, became key mediators between Renamo and the Frelimo government.<sup>57</sup>

Reconciliation refers to the act by which people who have been apart and split off from one another begin to walk together again towards peace and cohesiveness. Essentially it refers to the restoration of broken relationship either be familial, communal or national. It is the coming together of people who have been alienated and separated from one another by conflict to create a community again. Reconciliation requires physical safety and economic and social justice. It requires not only bringing people together to create a shared understanding, but to succeed, much more. It requires an unflinching confrontation with the underlying, chronic injustices faced by a society and the mobilization of its institutions to address these issues in ways that are distributive and procedurally just, and also genuinely inclusive. Addressing the issue of the impoverishment of the Congolese people and the mismanagement of Mobutu's regime, Longman explains the reaction of the Catholic church vis-a vis the suffering of the Congolese population when he writes:

In the early 1990's, the Catholic church finally emerged as a major voice for social change in Congo. After years of enduring the brutality, severe corruption and gross economic mismanagement of the Mobutu regime, the Congolese population begun to mobilize in support of democratic reform, and the Catholic church offered important support to the democracy movement. Catholic priests and lay leaders joined human

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<sup>56</sup>William Zartman and Soudia Touval. 2007. *Leashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World*, p.450.

<sup>57</sup>Dinis Sengulane and Jaime Pedro Goncalves. 1998. *A Calling for Peace: Christian Leaders and the Quest for Reconciliation in Mozambique*, p.2.

rights and other civil society groups, and catholic publication became important for dissent.<sup>58</sup>

Commenting on the state of justice in the governing institutions of the DRC, Eale<sup>59</sup> writes, ‘A challenge for a just society should be the permanent questioning of all who are, or aspire to be leaders of DRC. Moral Christian values should be emphasised in order to experience the justice expected by the majority of the Congolese population today’.

### **Reconciliation as God’s Calling**

The church is not only called to reconcile the sinner to God through a personal relationship with Christ, but it is also called to reconcile the broken world to God and to the creation. God is reconciling all things in heaven and on earth. We are alienated not only from one another, but also from the land that sustains us. Our ecosystems are increasingly damaged, and human bodies are likewise degraded. Most of us have little understanding on how our energy is derived or how our food is produced, and many of our current industrialized practices are both unhealthy for our bodies and unsustainable for the planet. Quoted in the Global Agriculture report, Cecilia Rocha<sup>60</sup>, the Director of the School of Nutrition at Ryerson University in Toronto asserts, ‘Food systems are making us sick. Unhealthy diets are the most obvious link, but are only one of many pathways through which food and farming systems affected human health’. She adds, ‘We must urgently address these impacts whenever they occur, and in parallel we must address the root cause of inequitable, unsustainable and healthy practices in food systems.’ Agriculturalist Fred Bahnson and theologian Norman Wirzba declare that in Christ God reconciles all bodies into a peaceful, life-promoting relationship with one another.<sup>61</sup>

Social divisions are what necessitate reconciliation. The apartheid era in South Africa presented the church with the challenge of fighting the fundamental source of division which was the apartheid. In many respects, the battle for justice was one that builds the legitimacy of the church as a political actor with real power to promote social change. The task of overcoming social divisions and building relationships in a democratic South was seen by society and by

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<sup>58</sup> Timothy Longman. 2001. *Congo: A Tale of Two Churches*, p. 2.

<sup>59</sup>Eale Bosela. 2016. *Justice and Poverty as Challenges for the Christian Churches*, p. 80.

<sup>60</sup>Global Agriculture News. 2017. *Industrial Food and Farming Systems Harm Human Health and the Environment*, p. 1.

<sup>61</sup>Bahnson, Fred and Norman Wirzba, 2012. *Making Peace with the land*, p.22.

the church leaders as key part of the church's role.<sup>62</sup> Unfortunately, this has not always been the case. The Church should wake up and play its role of being the light of the world. In our African societies where people experience a lot of problems such as injustice, poor governance, bad leadership, bad ethnicity, violence, poverty, war etc, the church has a key role to play in reconciliation and peace building. Church's role in addressing reconciliation more broadly in society should obviously be informed, limited and complemented by its internal reconciliation process. While the church can only play a limited role externally, without having its internal house in order, the internal process will never be successful. The external role is thus one that needs to continue, but will only reach its full potential through being energised by the fruition of its internal processes.

The Church has a critical role to play in ensuring that the voices of the voiceless reverberate in the hall of public policies. Advocacy in the church refers to the work of the church, which, together with other institutions of civil society, aims to change the structures and influence the economic and social policies of government or international institutions.<sup>63</sup> In light of this, we can say that the church has a critical call to appreciate and make use of her divine mission of fostering reconciliation in the society.

### **The Church as a Place and Instrument of Peacebuilding**

History and memory work undertaken in the context of peacebuilding is meant to support reconciliation and the construction of an imagined political community. Indeed, various studies have shown how much that memory is intrinsically linked to identity and transmission of memory and history in a post-conflict period can play a significant role in revolving new identities of citizenship,<sup>64</sup> a process at the root of reconciliation. On the issue of memory work in the context of peacebuilding in a post-conflict situation, McGrattan and Hopkins<sup>65</sup> argue that:

If memory and memory work then are inherently conflictual, the possibility of using them as foundations for a stable, lasting and peaceful settlement seems misguided. The point has, perhaps, most famously been elucidated by Max Weber in his discussion of leadership and how Germany would rebuild from the First World War and the internal convulsions that coincided with its conclusion.

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<sup>62</sup> Hugo van der Merwe. 2003. *The Role of the Church in Promoting Reconciliation in Post-TRC South Africa*, pp.269-281

<sup>63</sup> Eale, Bosela, *Op Cit.*, p. 250.

<sup>64</sup> Ereshnee Naidu and Cyril Adonis. *History on their own terms: The relevance of the past for a New Generation*, p.29.

<sup>65</sup> Cillian McGrattan and Stephen Hopkins. 2017. *Memory in Post-Conflict Societies*, p. 489.

Peace prevails where everyone has fair and equal access to justice and an atmosphere to live in security. Peace sustains only in a situation where everyone is able to participate in shaping their destiny and decision makers are accountable to the people. Peace is, therefore, a state of order, of freedom from fear and want. In such a society as Prophet Micah says, “Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid” (Micah 4:4).

On the contrary, it is a matter of serious concern today that we are forced to live in situations where peace is threatened and justice is denied. The greed for power from nations and individuals exclude others, concentrate only in accumulation of wealth and exploitation of resources, leaving others dispossessed and impoverished. The domination of the rich and the powerful causes discord and adds deprivation. The Italian Deputy Prime Minister stated that French economic policies prohibited African states’ development and contributed to increased migration from the continent. This rhetoric is nothing new and reveals the complex status of present-day European influence in Africa<sup>66</sup>. He adds, ‘France is one of those countries that printing money for 14 states prevent their economic development and contributes to the fact that the refugees leave and then die in the sea or arrive on our coasts.’<sup>67</sup> All these aspects increase domination, marginalization, violence, conflicts, wars, poverty and sufferings in human life. It is not God’s will that is fulfilled in such a situation, but it contradicts the purposes of God’s ways of living together in the household of God. The living together in the household of God with a collaborative, mutually recognized and respected atmosphere will make the household a place where peace with justice and security prevail. Such a situation requires a radical reversal of the existing systems and conditions, to a context in which “justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). Peace is basically a gift of God, and is related to God’s blessing and God’s graciousness.

## **Peacebuilding: A Challenge for Churches in Africa**

The absence of peace in the African context is to be understood not merely in the contexts of violence and civil wars only. Denial of the basic socio-economic and cultural rights to a vast number of people basically leads to a situation where peace is negated and justice is denied. The end of the Cold War, the growing impacts of globalization and rapid economic growth are making some African countries to reposition and redefine their roles both at the regional and

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<sup>66</sup> Landry Signe. 2019. *France-Africa relations challenged by China and European Union*, p.1.

<sup>67</sup> Christopher Giles and Jack Goodman. 2019. *African migration: Is the CFA franc forcing people to live?* p.1.

at the global levels. There are many factors and key stakeholders from within the continent as well as outside of the continent responsible for threatening peace in Africa and intensifying conflicts. When we agree that civil war and conflicts tend to end in several contexts in Africa because of democracy, it is also increasingly evident that threat to peace and security at different levels continues to be a pervasive phenomenon in several African countries. This is the case for instance of the lack of peace in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where external influence uses some local leaders in both the army and politics to cause trouble while natural resources are illegally exploited and this at the expense of many lives. At this point, the church can do advocacy work outside the country. This happened with both Catholic and Protestant churches who did advocacy work through the United Nations to avoid bloodshed when President Kabila refused to step down at the end of his second and last term in office. The All Africa Conference of Churches accompanied the Church of Christ of Congo from 2016 to 2018 for advocacy work in preparation for peaceful elections.

Africa today faces an ever increasing level of multifaceted social, economic, political and security challenges. A wide array of problems is precipitating in African societies, threatening peace and denial of justice. Armed conflicts and violence, increasing poverty, inadequate health care, economic exploitation, environmental degradation and exploitation of natural resources, militarization, arms build-up, spread of small arms and light weapons, domination and intervention of major powers from outside the continent as well as within the continent; ethnic and religious conflicts, communal violence, and political unrest; torture, custodial death, suppression of people's legitimate right to self-determination; lack of rule of law and democratic governance are part of a series of issues affecting Africa's peace and security.

It is in this context that the churches in Africa are called upon to be peace makers and to be courageous, committed and consistent in their efforts in order to be credible voices in the household of God. Churches are also called to be instruments of God's purpose in the world, which calls them to take concrete action in peace-building in order to move beyond conflicts. The ecumenical movement itself emanated from the need to be in peace and unity not only within the church, but with the community of people who belong to other faiths. But for the church to fully pay its prophetic role, the leadership should be blameless and should put first their house in order.

## Conclusion

The role of the church in peace-making and reconciliation is strengthened by the fact that the social and political crisis in society questions radically the message of the Gospel. The church's initiative for reconciliation should be anchored on the concept that peace is the tranquillity that flows from the right order mutual understanding between its members. When we put the right order into the structures of our society, and we experience love for one another and forgiveness, the result is peace. Peace should not be perceived as the absence of war or violence<sup>68</sup>. Peace-making is a vital pillar in the role of the church in peacebuilding. Peace-making is more than just bringing spiritual reconciliation between man and God. It involves that work of reconciling hostile factions so that communities experience God's blessings.

The church as a place and an instrument of reconciliation and peacebuilding should point out the fact that reconciliation requires physical safety and economic and social justice. The church's role requires not only bringing people together to create a shared understanding, but to succeed. People first need to have their immediate physical needs sufficiently met to be able to be open to the reconciliation process. To play a decisive role in persuading the government of its flock from steering clear of corrupt practices in civil society or the government, the Church must be the link and a bridge in society. As a sub-system of society, the church should find means of working together in public spheres to address issues such as corruption. As an institution of this world, the church and Christians have the mandate to challenge world systems for the improvement of the Church and society as a whole. The church is called upon to be a model of Christ in the transformation and renewal of people's hearts as they become the salt and light of the world. Reconciliation and peacebuilding require the credibility that can be established by only the implementation of social and economic justice programs that concretely address the substantive injustices.

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<sup>68</sup> Burton, J.W. *Violence explained: The source of conflicts, violence and crime and their prevention*, p.297.



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