

“Church Leaders as Peacebuilders in South Sudan”
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- It's an honor to be with you again and to be asked to address this very important gathering of AFRECS and its South Sudan partners. On a couple of previous occasions I have spoken to you of peacebuilding from the perspective of an American diplomat engaged in Track 1 diplomacy involving Sudan, Darfur and South Sudan. This time will be rather different. I'm going to try to speak to you as a Christian, who has been teaching and thinking about Christian peacebuilding – its foundation and modes – and its application to South Sudan. I have some hesitation about doing that, because many of you have been deeply engaged in Christian peacebuilding and know the context much better than I. But I do hope to get out some thoughts that may stimulate additional creativity in the peacebuilding task.

Setting the Scene

- Richard Parkin said back in July, “The Church is the purveyor of the message of peace that must resonate throughout South Sudan if peace is to become more than a plea. Empowering the Church as peacemaker is a compelling need.... The Church can live into this role if we as partners and friends invest in the competence building that must accompany the rhetoric of peace building.” I think that is an excellent insight. More competence in peacebuilding is essential. Perhaps even more important is greater clarity about the Christian peacebuilding mission in this unique context.
- I don't need to spend much time with this group to set the scene, but let me briefly frame developments since the outbreak of civil war within South Sudan at the end of 2013. In 2015 under enormous international pressure from IGAD, the AU, the UN and the troika of US, UK, and Norway, Salva Kiir and Riek Machar signed an agreement to establish a Transitional Government of National Unity. That agreement didn't work, in the sense that Machar did not come to Juba to take up his position for 8 months. There was at least a modicum of peace for almost a year, but in July extreme violence broke out in Juba between government forces and Machar's many bodyguards. Machar fled and eventually turned up in Khartoum. A new vice president, ostensibly from the SPLM/In Opposition, was named, but was rejected by most of Machar's lieutenants. A few weeks ago the IO Political Bureau, meeting in Khartoum, passed a resolution to wage war against the Juba government.¹
- Violence, which was initially concentrated in Unity, Jonglei and Upper Nile states, has spread into almost all other areas including the states of Equatoria. Militias representing other ethnic groups have defected from the Government, and some of them have affiliated with the SPLM/InOpposition. The Government initially used funds to retain the loyalty of some of

these generals but has basically run out of money. Besides, with 700 generals it's pretty hard to pay them all off.

- In August the UN Security Council authorized a strengthened mandate for UNMISS (S/Res 2304(12)) to send an additional force of 4,000 to protect civilians, plus UN and humanitarian personnel. Controversially, it called upon that force to control the airport; to secure entry and egress from Juba; and to “disarm” government security forces who threaten civilians. The additional force is to come from neighboring countries. The South Sudan government initially asserted that the new mandate would violate South Sudan's sovereignty, but subsequently accepted it after the Security Council threatened an arms embargo. However, that force has not yet been deployed, and there are doubts about whether it can fulfill this broader mission.
- Church leadership has been active in trying to promote a settlement. In 2015 the South Sudan Council of Churches committed to an Action Plan for Peace with three parts:
 - First, advocating a change of narrative for negotiation and implementation of a negotiated peace agreement; I confess I don't understand exactly what that means. I hope it means changing the common narrative from “ethnic vengeance must be satisfied” to “justice requires reconciliation and peace, not vengeance.” And, certainly church leaders have been doing a lot of advocacy for peace and reconciliation.
 - Second, creating neutral forums in which stakeholders could overcome mistrust and agree on critical peace issues and processes. Some of that has been going on. I note that in August the Council of Churches was planning a “neutral forum” in Wau. There may be other examples.
 - And, third, leveraging Christian values of forgiveness and reconciliation to move the peace process forward. Has the church been able “to leverage” those values? The Council of Churches is supporting the Committee for National Healing, Peace, & Reconciliation in its work at the local level, including plans to train hundreds of peace mobilizers to work in all the *payams* of South Sudan.²
- For peacebuilders, including religious peacebuilders, there are three basic modes of promoting reconciliation: advocacy, good offices, and mediation.
 - Advocacy is the most common mode and usually the easiest. Advocacy is part of the Council of Churches Action Plan for Peace. It is part of what the Episcopal Church in South Sudan is doing. Church leaders need to continue to make regular statements urging “a change in the common narrative” of ethnic vengeance to reconciliation and peace. Church leaders should be talking to South Sudan Government officials *and to the 700 generals* – and colonels and captains. That's the priority on advocacy. Advocacy also includes education. That means educating the people of South Sudan about the necessity of reconciliation in place of ethnic vengeance. It also means lobbying the diaspora so that its members are not amplifying the voices calling for ethnic revenge. Advocates can also lobby diplomats and international organizations, but that should, frankly, be a lesser

priority. Advocacy is essential and can sometimes make a difference. But with deep-seated and prolonged conflict it is rarely enough.

- Good offices means informally offering assistance to both sides in reaching a peaceful solution. I remind you that was essentially the role of the African Council of Churches in the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972, which ended for 10 years the North-South conflict. To be effective, the party providing good offices must be viewed as neutral. Since providing good offices does not involve a formal process, the involvement of the peacebuilders may range from intense to episodic, depending on their relationships with the parties to the conflict and on opportunities that may become available. Good offices is a highly appropriate role for church leaders in the present situation.
- Mediation is a more formal process, normally based on a written agreement with both sides. Again the mediator must be viewed as neutral. The role of the mediator is to assist the parties to find a solution they can live with, which meets their most essential needs. Usually the mediator does not propose a solution, although at times the parties may ask the mediator to do so. But danger resides in a mediator-proposed solution. To be lasting, the negotiated solution must be owned by the parties. If they don't own it, problems with the agreement and a resumption of violence will be blamed on the mediator. Mediation usually involves a Track One or diplomatic process, but Christian mediation might well happen with more localized conflicts.
- What is the biggest challenge to an effective church peacebuilding role? The conflict has become heavily militarized. It's not an argument over ideology. It's not a struggle over what policies should be pursued by the government. It is rather a struggle among different SPLA militias, plus some tribal militias, which have become arrayed largely along ethnic lines. Moreover, the militia leaders, more or less linked to the two principals, have access to wealth through force of arms. They don't have much incentive to stop fighting because they have no overriding political goals with the possible exception of ethnic revenge. That makes it particularly hard for other institutions in society – such as churches or tribal elders – to exercise moral suasion over the combatants. And, a related point, the traditional role of women as peacemakers has diminished. Indeed, in the struggle of militias, women are subjected to unprecedented violence, including mass rape by unrestrained armed men. Clearly most South Sudanese women feel unable to play a peacebuilding role at this time. However, the Task Force on the Engagement of Women in Sudan and South Sudan is continuing its efforts, now focused heavily on South Sudan.
- In this wretched situation, how do we get to a more effective peacebuilding role? I don't have a plan. That would be highly presumptuous. But hopefully some of the following points will stimulate the creativity of those working for peace on the ground.

II. Biblical Guidance

- As Christians we have a primary sourcebook for peacebuilding: the Bible. When I make that statement, some of you may be saying to yourselves that Dane Smith is offering obligatory piety at a solemn conference of Anglican church leaders. Let me assure you that I have no

interest in obligatory piety. The Bible is a sourcebook, but it is an occasionally ambiguous sourcebook— even if a glorious one. There are those like the late Christopher Hitchens, who have argued that Judaism and Christianity are inherently violent because they spring from texts steeped in violence. Such critics like to cite Deuteronomy 7, which attributes to God a command to commit genocide against the people of Canaan, and to the New Testament Book of Revelation, which depicts cataclysmic violence against the enemies of God and God’s Messiah. And, we might hesitate for at least a moment, when we consider a saying by Jesus: “Do not think I have come to bring peace; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

- Despite these occasional contradictions and ambiguities, for Christians, being faithful to the Bible requires interpretation, drawing on the text as a whole and specifically on the message, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our mission statement comes from Jesus’ words in Matthew 5: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.”
- I would point to several key texts which are touchstones for carrying out that mission:
 - The first one is God’s promise, “I will be with you.” God spoke those words (Genesis 31:3) to Jacob, when God instructed him to return with wives and children to his homeland, setting in motion his courageous and successful effort to make peace with brother Esau. You remember that Esau had sworn to kill Jacob after losing his birthright to his younger brother. So Jacob prepared very carefully for the encounter and then found – to his great relief – that with God’s guidance Esau was prepared to forgive him. And Isaiah (41:10) tells us “Fear not. I am with you. ... I am your God. I will strengthen and help you.” Jesus’ final words to his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew (28:20) were, “And remember, I am with you always.” And in John 14, “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” We must take encouragement from God’s promise to be with us in peacebuilding.
 - The second guideline comes from Psalm 85: “Peace and justice shall kiss.” Peace cannot last unless the settlement agreed upon is seen to provide justice to those who feel aggrieved. Justice must be a major objective of religious peacebuilding. To have credibility, Christian peacebuilders should be seen to represent churches which are communities of love and justice. That was St. Paul’s concept of the church. And unless our churches are perceived basically as communities of love and justice – however flawed they may be in practice – we will have trouble presenting ourselves as credible peacebuilders.
 - A third guideline – and this will probably surprise you – is this: “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” This is *not* a counsel of passivity. We have often misunderstood the context of Jesus’ remark. What is the context? It is one of asymmetric physical power – an imbalance of power – between one group and another. Jesus was talking about an unarmed Jew facing a Roman soldier. And he was not talking about a fistfight, but a backhand across the face. A fistfight would be

between equals, not a favored option for a Roman soldier; a backhand with the right hand across the right side of the face of the Jew was an insult – a devastating insult. Jesus was talking about what the late Walter Wink has called “a transforming initiative.” Turning the left cheek toward the aggressor means confronting him with an unattractive option. Should he use his weaker left arm to backhand the left cheek, or should he resort to his fists? Or maybe ... he should begin to think differently about the confrontation in the face of the courage and determination of the person aggressed. A transforming initiative.

Now let’s try to translate that to South Sudan – a situation of unequal power between militias which have guns and Christian leaders who have the Word of God – weapons of moral and spiritual suasion – to establish the basis for reconciliation. I think what Jesus was saying is that in this situation of unequal physical power Christian peacebuilders need to seek God’s guidance. With God’s guidance they can stretch their imaginations to come up with transforming initiatives which strengthen their moral position and nudge the aggressors toward a change in behavior. That’s not easy, of course. It’s a heavy lift. But it is a call to creativity and courage which is faithful to Jesus Christ, our savior and mentor.

Here is an example, not a perfect one, but moving in the right direction. In Yei a few weeks ago the pastor of the Christian Revival Center mobilized hundreds of Christians who put on white sackcloth and paraded through the streets calling for peace and repentance. In Yei Freedom Square that pastor, John Sebit, preached from the Book of Jonah, saying that God had passed a message to the people of South Sudan to come before God and seek guidance for reconciliation. More of that kind of prophetic action, particularly actions which target militia leaders, could make a difference.

III. What do Christian leaders have to do with peacebuilding?

- In spite of the Biblical guidance, historically Christian leaders have not spent a great deal of time thinking systematically about their role as peacemakers. Of course, they have often been doing peacemaking in their churches and communities but they haven’t been developing peacebuilding strategies. Over two millennia there have basically been two models for Christian peacebuilding: pacifism and just war. Pacifism was the stance of the early church fathers. Tertullian, a third century teacher from North Africa, said that Christians should literally follow Jesus’ command of non-violence. They should not resist aggression or persecution, and they should not serve in the military or the police. That idea lost out when the Roman Empire became Christian. And it was not revived until the Anabaptists came along in the Reformation. The Mennonites and then the Quakers reasserted what they viewed as Jesus’ command to reject participation in any violence and to refuse military service. And South Sudan church leaders should indeed refuse to participate in the violence. But that’s not enough.

- A quite different path was taken by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. They said the use of force was permissible only if the objective was to punish aggression and to restore peace. That “just war” model continues to be the approach of the Roman Catholic Church today. But note: just war basically provides guidance to the state, to government leaders, and maybe *to militia leaders*. It does not provide much guidance for Christian leaders seeking to stop violence. South Sudan church leaders have been proclaiming that the current civil war is unjustified and, in fact, an abomination. They should continue. But that’s not enough.
- So neither of these peacebuilding models provide guidance for activist Christian peacebuilders. But over the last twenty years a new model has emerged. It's called "Just Peacemaking", or in some Roman Catholic circles, "Just Peace." It draws heavily on the Bible, in particular, Jesus's "transforming initiatives" as our basic platform for action. It also draws on the 20th century experience of great spiritual leaders like Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. who mobilized non-violent resistance to violent repression. It draws on theologies of liberation as a basic Gospel message – the claim that Jesus Christ was Liberator, whose basic message was to bring deliverance to the poor and oppressed. And it draws on internationally recognized standards of human rights, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related human rights agreements. Just Peacemaking is most closely associated with the work of the late Glen Stassen, an American theologian and ethicist at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. At its core, it aims at helping Christians to engage actively and passionately in efforts to reconcile conflict in their churches, but also at the community, national and international level.
- A key feature of the just peacemaking model is its insistence on cooperation with other right-minded elements in society. It explicitly calls on Christian leaders to work with civil society. Civil society, as you know, refers to the range of voluntary associations which seek to contribute to human life in various ways -- education, relief for the destitute and sick, empowering women and children, or expanding economic opportunity. Cooperation with government or parts of government may also be appropriate, depending on the government. But it is not an essential part of the model. Just peacemaking does not work against government under normal circumstances, but it must maintain its capacity for prophetic distance from government to be true to its mentor, Jesus Christ. The model does definitely mean cooperation with civil society, however.
- Beyond that long-term perspective on violent conflict resolution, Just Peacemaking recognizes that peace is not a simple end state. The negotiated agreement which ends a lengthy violent convulsion must be supported over the medium and long-term.
 - It must be supported by the promotion of respect for human rights. It must be supported by promoting fair representation of the groups involved in the settlement through a reasonably democratic process. So, while seeking peace, Christian leaders should be advocating respect for human rights and participatory politics. After a state of peace is achieved, Christian leaders should work with civil society groups and government to strengthen the rule of law and to speak out against human rights abuses.

- A state of peace must also be supported economically. Peace is unlikely to survive if normal economic activity is not restored and if the economic benefits are not shared with some equity by the conflicting parties. The population must generally feel it has a stake in peace because there is realistic hope of improvement in their lives – jobs, health care, education; economic opportunity for farmers, herders and city-dwellers. Christian leaders should work with civil society and the private sector for programs that support sustainable economic growth. Otherwise conflict may erupt again.
- But at this point, when violence is as pervasive as it is in South Sudan today, those longer-term tasks are lesser priorities. We peacemakers need to focus primarily now on promoting reconciliation.

IV. Guidelines

- So now, a specific list of guidelines. The list draws heavily both from standard mediation practice and from the insights of John Paul Lederach, whom I consider to be probably the most skilled Christian peacebuilder in operation today.
 1. Reconciliation is a lengthy journey. John Paul Lederach says that reaching peace in complex international conflicts is likely to require the investment of at least a decade. That will not be news to citizens of Sudan and South Sudan. That was the case in Nicaragua, the former Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland, and Mozambique. And in Sudan and South Sudan peace is still elusive after 60 years. Patience and long-term commitment are essential. We must not give up.
 2. Humility. Making peace is hard work and failure is frequent. Moreover, the persons undertaking good offices or mediation need to show modesty about their knowledge of the situation, particularly about the interests and the objectives of the two sides. Humility *requires being a good listener*. What we say may be important, but how we listen is much more important. The antagonists need to perceive that we are listening to their grievances and objectives. In particular we must avoid moral arrogance. Humility does not mean lack of confidence or self-confidence. Quiet confidence must be our watchword. Our confidence as religious peacebuilders comes from our mandate – Jesus’ blessing on the peacemakers. It comes from the knowledge that in working humbly for reconciliation we are acting as God’s sons and daughters.
 3. Peacebuilding is a team effort. It is rarely an activity of individuals. Peacemakers need a team to add to their information and to their understanding of the total context. Each member of the team needs to develop sources of information in the community. The right team provides mutual support and encouragement. It is particularly important to include women, recognizing their unique peacebuilding potential. Reviving and facilitating the female peace-building role should be an integral part of Christian peacebuilding in South Sudan.

4. Prayer. Prayer plays a central role in religious peacebuilding. That's not surprising. Many think of that as public prayers at the beginning of negotiations. Public prayer can be important to injecting a spiritual element and religious norms of behavior into the proceedings. Public prayers are also appropriate to recognize the grief experienced by those whose loved ones have died and whose lives have been completely disrupted. It can be supplemented with Scripture readings which apply the wisdom of the Bible, including an emphasis on shared humanity in place of ethnic differences.

However, the place of prayer extends far beyond this public aspect. Public prayers can seem pro-forma or superficial. What is more important is the commitment of the peacebuilders to the discipline of prayer. That means private or silent prayer about the outcome of the peacebuilding process. Peacebuilders need to seek both privately and together God's guidance on how to proceed. They should position themselves to be receptive to whatever messages the Holy Spirit conveys about moving the peace process forward – for example coming up with transforming initiatives which can induce a change of perspective on the part of the antagonists. Building prayer into your modus operandi as a peacebuilder is also valuable because it encourages solidarity within your peace team.

5. Find a way to establish personal rapport with both sides. This is not easy, but it can be done. Creating personal relationships can be difficult in formal arrangements with participants sitting at a table. Look for ways to encourage informal discussion, using churches as the setting where feasible. That may have a calming effect on military leaders. Establishing rapport does not mean approval of or friendship with the parties. Peacebuilders often have to deal with truly awful people – people who are power mad, liars, murderers, sadists, but such people don't usually behave like that in all contexts. Being neutral does not mean that the mediators are unbiased. We all have a certain degree of bias in dealing with people. Neutrality does mean that peacebuilders deliberately try to set aside personal bias to play a neutral role with both sides. That is a central axiom of mediation.

6. A just solution. The function of those offering good offices or mediation is not to propose a solution. That is the task of the parties. However, peacebuilders must encourage the parties to find a solution in which both sides can agree that some degree of essential justice is reached, even if neither side achieves all its objectives. A good negative example is the failure of the Abuja Agreement of 2005 on Darfur. Enormous pressure was put on the different rebel parties to sign the agreement. Only one party signed. The others believed that justice was missing because there were no clear provisions for compensation for Darfuris for the loss of life and property they suffered. That agreement led to renewed conflict.

In South Sudan there is a very particular problem of justice which must be faced and overcome. That is the deep rooted conviction of many militia commanders, sometimes egged on by ethnic leaders, that achieving justice means avenging their own tribal losses – family members, friends, comrades-in-arms. So Christian peacebuilders must encourage the parties to consider the Biblical view of justice. In the Bible justice includes adjudication of wrongs but also forgiveness and reconciliation. To get this across you may need to ply the parties with stories of hope and reconciliation both from the Bible and from South Sudan.

7. Finally, prepare to assume risks. In South Sudan, church leaders should be thinking carefully about mobilizing their congregations for non-violent resistance to militia violence. They should also be insisting that South Sudan's political leaders prioritize justice – not military advantage, not personal enrichment, and not ethnic predominance. Prioritizing justice means safety for civilians. It means law and order. It means using South Sudan's oil revenues to promote the welfare of the whole population. Prioritizing justice takes lots of courage. It takes the kind of courage exercised by Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, who was shot dead celebrating mass by militia leaders who opposed his call for justice for the poor and for an end to vicious civil war in his country which was decimating the poor. I would go so far as to say that in South Sudan today the situation calls for a willingness to take that kind of risk in the cause of peace. I say that fully recognizing that I am not a South Sudanese and am not personally at risk and that I don't face the enormous challenge of leading a congregation amidst horrendous violence. I can only say that, if you choose that course, God will be with you, whatever the personal outcome may be.

¹ Article 2(d): “Call for reorganization of the SPLA(IO) so that it can wage a popular armed resistance against the authoritarian and fascist regime of President Salva Kiir in order to bring peace, freedom, democracy and the rule of the law in the country.” Sudan Tribune Sept 25, 2016 as reported by John Ashworth

² There are 514 payams, the next lowest unit of administration below the counties (180) for 28 states.