



WEA
WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE



The Ploughshare

WEA Peace and Reconciliation Initiative E-News: April 2010

Conflict and Religion

Focus: Nigeria



Photo BBC

As the smoke cleared after weeks of violence in Nigeria the death toll stood at over 500 with thousands made homeless, properties and shops burned to the ground and deeply divided communities blaming the other. In the aftermath there is no doubt that truly horrendous atrocities were committed on both sides of the conflict.

Much has been said and written about the sectarian nature of the conflict, framing it in terms of a Christian south vs Muslim north religious war for dominance. It is ironic that the city at the centre of the worst violence, Jos, is the acronym for “Jesus our Saviour.” However, careful analysis shows the conflict to be more complex than a simplistic view based on religious intolerance. At the heart of this conflict are important issues such as access to resources, poor internal governance, and stubborn tribal allegiances.

Tajudeen Akanji, the director of the Centre for peace and conflict resolution at the University of Ibadan clearly considers the real issue is that between settlers and natives. Where Muslims are the settlers and Christians the natives.

"It's an indigene-settler conflict having a religious colouration, (but) people have been mobilised along religious lines,"



Photo: Church times UK

In this scenario the Christian settlers feel threatened by what they perceive as an unwanted influx of settlers. They want to protect their lands and estates and nor are they ready to work together with them in political partnerships. On the other side the settlers feel they are being denied access and likewise threatened.

All of this is exacerbated by Nigeria's constitution which strengthens ethnic affiliation and allegiance through preferential "state of origin" status. Official posting and access to employment as well as political appointment are based on ethnic and state of origin.

Let's bear in mind that Nigeria, the most populated country in Africa is also reasonably sophisticated and modern. Good university, medical schools, jurisprudence, thriving civil society. As a law student told a reporter for the Guardian, "For all those who go out and fight their Muslim or Christian brothers, there are many more who will take them in and protect them when the fight breaks out."

So how has it happened that this civil conflict has been turned into a religious conflict?

The answer is political manipulation. Powerful actors on both sides of the conflict have mobilized support through striking into the deep vein of religious passion. The power of religious language and sentiment cannot only be harnessed for good and positive change, but also violence creating a mindset that can commit the most heinous atrocity without conscience or qualm. Please, let's look at this squarely in the face - both sides, Muslim and Christian have committed crimes of violence.

While the solution to Nigeria's conflict will require political settlement, religious values common to both Christian and Muslim will be important links and threads restraining violence and creating trust and an atmosphere conducive to peace-building.

Local mediators found the following indispensable, and certainly these lessons are transferable to other context of violence and conflict:

- Local established partners are invaluable. local organization already engaged in conflict resolution programming and had a good understanding of local nuances

and dynamics, including ethnic tensions and local interpretations of Christianity and Islam. Without a local link, one might inadvertently misunderstand the situation and increase tensions through poor programming

- Multi-pronged approaches within programs are more likely to reach all conflict parties and conflict-affected communities. IMC/MCDF has used media campaigns and training workshops
- In conflict areas, interventions facilitated away from the area of conflict can increase chances for success. The Kaduna and Plateau groups were taken away from their communities to Lokoja to work on their peace plans. This isolation kept them focused on the work at hand, and allowed them a place to reflect, encouraged interaction, decreased the risk for community pressure, and promoted emotional healing.
- Dividing the programs into stages can allow for communication, feedback, and evaluation in conflict settings. Stages can be particularly helpful when in active conflict environments where suspicion and tension is common to ensure the 'do no harm' rule is upheld and programs are sensitive to change.

Recommendations

1. A nexus built between government and relevant civil society actors is necessary for success in sensitive environments.
2. Capacity-building for youth networks is an important tool in environments where youth are direct perpetrators of violence. Networks can help reduce violence by engaging youth and giving them a sense of ownership during the peace process.
3. Conflict programming should engage grassroots participation to reduce conflicts in target communities who have a stake in bringing lasting peace. This can ensure local buy-in and a sense of ownership, essential to building peace organically, and building a bridge to regional and national diplomatic efforts.

Please remember to pray our brothers and Sisters in the Nigerian Evangelical community as well as those of all faiths, that peace and goodwill might return to Nigeria.

Following this article I have included the introduction Dr Richard Howell's article on Religion in Conflict with a link to this entire paper. Dr Howell is General Secretary of the Asia Evangelical Alliance

Religion in Conflict

Rev. Dr. Richard Howell



We live in a world of unimaginable horrors: nuclear weaponry, religious prejudice, and ideological hatred. With such horrors comes a sense of urgency and a moral imperative for us to raise the question, what is the purpose of religious language? Because religious statements are considered truthful by a people; they allow their lives to be shaped by them and project a world they would like to inhabit. At times societies employ religious language to gain moral sanction for the acts of violence. However the Church in its

transformational mission is duty bound to encourage and employ the biblical metaphors of reconciliation and blessing.

Religious language is meant to do something. This brings us to the question of power, which undeniably shapes our individual and social behaviour. The purpose of religious language is to use all available intellectual and intuitional means to interpret the nature of ultimate reality and to invite the human race to share in the privileges of a personal relationship with God. But religious language has also been used to justify violence.

Democratizing societies in South Asia display a disturbing common tendency towards ethnic and religious violence. The reason is simple. As societies open up and politicians scramble for power, they appeal to the public for votes by using the most direct, effective religious language, which cements group solidarity in opposition to some other group. Religious language is most effective in adding fuel to the fires of ethnic or religious conflict. Sometimes the conflict turns into a full-scale war. The warfare religious language is often used as a motivational tool for political ends, for nothing better unites and mobilises people and resources for action than war.

Go to www.weapri.org/resource/ for the entire article and more.

Religion Conflict and Peace-building Toolkit

USAID has produced an excellent toolkit giving basic guidelines and simple strategies to pursue when considering reconciliation and conflict management in the context of religious violence. This is an excellent short summary and supporting supplementary resource to our Christian and Biblically focused strategies.

The toolkit is available on the resource page of the WEAPRI website: ***www.weapri.org/resource/***



WEAPRI on Facebook

Don't forget: WEAPRI is now a Facebook group. Go into Facebook and have a review of the page and the various options you have to participate, and consider becoming an active member. Remember your contribution matters. We can keep the WEAPRI community updated on events, travel, education, personal reflection and the work of peace-building.

If you don't know how to search for WEAPRI, just go to Facebook, click 'groups' in the left hand box and then type the search "WEAPRI".

The WEAPRI Facebook group will grow as you join and share the link with others interested as Evangelicals in peace-building and reconciliation.

The page is open to anyone for comment and contribution. However to prevent the site being vandalized an admin restriction is on the uploading of photographs, video and discussion subjects. Just send those through to the WEAPRI secretariat for posting.



Coming up in the May WEAPRI Ploughshare:

- Israel – Palestine Conflict
- Review of Christ at the Checkpoints conference Bethlehem
- Concordis International : Launch on Israel Palestine Conflict research and study paper VIII



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