

Working for Peace and Reconciliation **Section Resource Paper**

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The Mandate to work for peace and reconciliation

Peace is at the heart of the Christian Gospel. A recurrent theme during the farewell discourses of our Lord Jesus Christ recorded in John's Gospel Peace. For example in John 14:27, the Lord said, "**Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid....**" This peace is profound. It is different from the counterfeit shallow peace that the world gives.

The world's peace may sometimes be seen simply as the absence of war. The world has known a number of devious ruthless dictators who managed to manipulate people into a situation where there is absence of war. Even in homes, the absence of conflict is not always a sign of peace in the family. Some selfish people can manipulate their spouses or children into simply falling in line with their dictates – thus giving an appearance of peace at home – peace maintained at the cost of injustice to spouse and children. This is not the character of the peace ushered in by the One described as the "Prince of Peace".

The Peace ushered in by our Lord Jesus Christ has to do with total well being of the recipients of this peace as well as the entire community. The Hebrew term "Shalom" is closer to the understanding of this quality of peace. The total well being of all concerned is when peace and justice move together. The absence of such total wellbeing calls for believers to make every effort to initiate reconciliation.

In his first epistle, Peter concludes a series of short pieces of advice for living by using words similar to the Ephesians verse from which the theme of the uniting General Council comes. He called all to commit to "Unity of the spirit..."

"Finally, all of you have unity of spirit, sympathy, and love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. 9 Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. 10 For "Those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and their lips from speaking deceit; 11 let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it." (1 Peter 3: 8 – 11, cf. Psalm 34: 13 – 14)

To strengthen the point of unity of the spirit, Peter quoted from Psalm 34 word for word to unpack the contents of unity of the spirit. This includes the call to seek peace and pursue it. Seeking peace seems to be an illusive venture and therefore seekers are also called upon to pursue it. To make every effort to ensure that it does not slip away. The peace believers called upon to seek and pursue is linked with turning away from evil and doing good. It is linked with righteousness or justice, which ensures that all live in right relationships.

This kind of Shalom, which we are called upon to seek and pursue, is a missing commodity in the world today. Many homes know very little peace as conflicts and even domestic violence grip many families. Communities and nations are faced with all kinds of conflicts and wars. Some of the conflicts are aggravated by the use of ethnic and religious sentiments. Many of the community and national or international conflicts have links with economic injustice and the wielding of political and military might in a manner that is insensitive to the right relationships that God's value for justice calls for. Palestine-Israel, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Great Lakes region of Africa are just a few of the well-known conflicts. But there are many other conflicts with dire consequences and new ones constantly arise. For example, since 2008 alone, worrisome political developments and community conflicts have arisen or been aggravated in Zimbabwe, Kenya, Madagascar, Thailand, Philippines, Nigeria, and other places. These conflicts have led to death and loss of property. Many have become displaced.

The Cold war era brought much pain, insecurity and injustice. There had been for many years the fear of what the escalation of nuclear armaments could do in such an era. Since the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, that insecurity has simply taken on new forms. We still have to contend with nuclear weaponry with new challenges. In addition, new walls have gone up in an era in which one cannot talk about two superpowers any more. Physical ones like the one Israel is building to shield itself and more subtle ones seem to be springing up separating people from one another instead of forging peace and reconciliation. While the one remaining superpower's hegemony has created new forms of insecurity, the legacy left by the former Eastern European communist regimes has left many gaping wounds and memories badly in need of healing. In some circumstances some of our churches are still treated as second class citizens still fighting for their God-given property and rights long after the fall of the Berlin wall.

How do we seek and pursue peace in all our communities? How can we be God's instruments committed to movement towards reconciliation in our world today? These are very challenging questions with no easy answers. However, being passive or doing nothing is not an option for the Christian. We have been reconciled to God and we have been given a ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5: 18).

WARC and REC actions for Peace and Reconciliation

In the first decade of the 21st century, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches has had to speak out clearly when events demonstrate how far away the world has strayed from seeking peace and pursuing it. We condemned in very strong terms the perpetrators of the September 11, 2001 mass murder of innocent people using air planes as weapons of aggression. We also spoke against the direction the "war on terror" was going, and cautioned that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were going to create a worse security situation in the world. Since then we have had to speak out against the use of military might against people in Palestine, Lebanon, Zimbabwe and other places. We have also spoken against the development of nuclear technology with potential for military use in Iran and North Korea.

We have been praying along and accompanying the people of the Korean peninsula as they seek to be one again, and encouraged peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

Where religious sentiments have been used to foster conflict, we have made efforts to initiate and model interfaith dialogue and to encourage Christians and neighbours of other religions to find creative means to live together in harmony.

Even within the church, where conflicts have compromised our witness, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches has been directly involved in conversations in South Africa, Ghana, Croatia and the USA, seeking peace and pursuing it, aiming at reconciliation in our church families. Sometimes the work of seeking reconciliation is even more difficult among Christian churches.

The Reformed Ecumenical Council has been very committed to seeking peace and pursuing it. Since the late 1990s, the Reformed Ecumenical Council was a transforming presence when there was an ethnic conflict which involved communities which are largely members of two of our member churches on the Benue and Taraba states in Nigeria. The R E C commissioned and paid for a professional conflict resolution expert to walk alongside the churches and communities as they sought creative ways to reconcile and live in harmony in their communities in these states. The impact of this work continues to be felt as those communities continue to struggle to build reconciled and reconciling communities.

The Reformed family has also been a very committed participant in the “Decade to Overcome Violence 2001 - 2010: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace” initiated by the World Council of Churches. During this decade, WARC has raised issues of systemic violence which has dealt ruthlessly with people in the margins of society in every nation in some cases for centuries – for example the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its continuing ramifications, and the caste system in India. Seeking peace and pursuing it entails a deep analysis of the violence that has made an impact on millions of people and taking steps of faith to address it holistically. As the ecumenical family prepares for the International Ecumenical Peace convocation to be held in Jamaica in May 2011, we need a fresh commitment of Reformed Churches to leave no stone unturned in our quest to overcome violence.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches has also appreciated the work of *Religions for Peace*, and have partnered with this organisation to contribute to peace in the world. *Religions for Peace* is the world’s largest multi-religious coalition advancing common action among religious communities for peace. It is committed to harnessing this strength in the multi-religious coalition to stop wars, end poverty and protect the earth. WARC lauds these goals and counts it as one of the important ways of partnering towards seeking and pursuing peace and reconciliation.

Some Challenges

Challenges to Peace and reconciliation as we begin the second decade of the 21st Century include:

1. Peace and harmony in families and homes – overcoming patriarchy and violence of every kind (physical, psychological, etc.)

2. Reconciliation in churches and congregations facing very serious conflicts
3. Peace and justice in communities faced with ethnic, racial, caste and tribal discrimination and conflict.
4. Addressing political conflicts and repression in a manner that truly brings peace and reconciliation.
5. Having prophetic engagement with world powers vis-à-vis current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and in addressing the Palestine-Israel issue, as well as addressing situations in which the world powers often feel tempted to seek solutions to challenging problems with military force.
6. Linkage of our commitment to peace and reconciliation with the WCC decade to overcome violence.

As we gather in Grand Rapids, Michigan we have the opportunity to examine right relationships between the different peoples who inhabit the land we meet in. How can there be genuine relations between first nation's people of North America who have been subjected to injustice in the land they had lived in for a very long time, and settlers and immigrants who now wield power over the land? To what extent are the voices of Native Americans being heard in any efforts for peace and reconciliation and in any efforts to bring justice to all?

Other questions include: How can there be healing of memories and a true just way forward for European Americans and African Americans to live in reconciled and reconciling communities? How can Christians lead a way forward for Hispanics, Asian Americans, and all Americans whatever their origin to build communities of peace and reconciliation?

People in our communities, Christians and non-Christians alike yearn for peace. The question is how prepared are we as members of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (congregations and individuals) to pray for and work for peace in our times, peace in our homes, peace in our communities, peace in our nations, peace in our world?

Questions:

What are the conflicts in your community or in your church that you are aware of?

In what ways is the church in your community a good witness or a negative influence on seeking peace and reconciliation?

In what ways would you like to see the church as a more effective actor in seeking peace and reconciliation in your community or in the world today?

How can the World Communion of Reformed Churches be an effective instrument in working for peace and reconciliation?