

Gospel of Peace

- God's *shalom* in words and actions

SHALOM PROCLAMATION

Shalom in focus and action

Some of the early Christians were described as:

“These people who have been turning the world upside down ...”
(Acts 17:6)

This section wants to connect with that dynamism and as such has three interlocking points of focus - ‘evangelism’, ‘gospel of peace’ and ‘*shalom* activism’. Each of these build on the vision and concept of *shalom* that we have already explored. They take these ideas and understandings of *shalom* and examine the possibilities of their creative, dynamic impact.

What is evangelism?

‘Evangelism’,¹ comes from the Greek word *euaggelizomi*² and it has only one meaning, ‘to proclaim good news.’

- “What image comes to mind when you hear the word ‘evangelism’?”
- “What is the popular idea of an evangelist?”

Test these images and ideas against a biblical Christian understanding of ‘evangelism’ and an ‘evangelist’ and their roots in the Greek, Roman and Hebrew worlds:

▪ **Greeks: heralding good tidings**

In ancient Greece the title ‘evangelist’ was almost exclusively used to describe a messenger sent directly from a battlefield with the single responsibility of proclaiming the news of victory to the people of their own city. They would travel as fast as possible, well ahead of the main army, by ship, on horseback or running swiftly on foot to share the good news of peace (*eirene*) with the anxiously awaiting inhabitants. The *euaggelion* could however also be any political or personal communication which brought joy (eg the birth of a child, the announcement of a wedding). The message could be either by word of mouth or in a letter, but the message is always *good* news. Bad news could never ever be *euaggelion* and its bearer never given the title ‘evangelist’.

¹ We fully recognise all the emotive associations that have attached themselves to this highly provocative word ‘evangelism’, but we refuse to be locked into stereotypes, we wish to change them, and to re-shape and re-direct the way we think about both ‘evangelists’ and ‘evangelism’.

² It is used 52 times in the New Testament in that form.



The messenger appears, raises a hand in greeting and proclaims the good news. The fact that it is good news is apparent from their shining face. Joy fills the city. The message itself, the *euaggelion*, was seen not simply as declaring salvation and peace for the people from their enemies, but as actually bringing that peace for the city into being as an actual experience. As the evangelist proclaimed the words it was believed that peace physically and tangibly embraced the city. The announcement was followed by celebration and sacrifice, with the messenger being personally rewarded.

▪ **Romans: announcing a new era of peace**

In the cult of Roman emperor worship, the ruler was thought to be divine by nature, with power extending over the whole created world. Imperial birth and accession were believed to be marked by signs in the heavens. An *euangelia*, a special proclamation taken by heralds to every corner of the empire was issued to declare these events. The imperial *euangelia* announced that there was a dynamic saviour for humanity and that a new era of peace (*pax*) had dawned for the world. The response was joy and rejoicing among the faithful population.

This idea presents an important background to the proclamation of the Christian *euaggelion*. There were signs at Jesus' birth, death and resurrection affirming his rule. In him *the* new age and rule of peace have begun. Caesar and Christ appear to have much in common, they both claim to be *evangel* to humankind, the emperor on the throne and the rabbi on the cross, yet they belong to different worlds.³

▪ **Hebrews: bringing good news**

In Hebrew the word *besorah* has the essential meaning of 'the joyful announcement of good news'. The word *besorah* was used to describe the message of victory from the battlefield following the defeat of Absalom:

'... he lifted up his eyes and looked, he saw a man running alone. And the watchman called out and told the king. And the king said, "If he is alone there are tidings in his mouth." And he drew near ... And the watchman said, "I think the running ... is like the running of Ahimaaz ben Zadok." And the king said, "He is a good man, and comes with *besorah* (good tidings)."'⁴

The word *besorah* was used of the lepers outside the gate of Samaria when they discover the Syrian siege has broken and are collecting food and wealth for themselves:

'They said to one another, "We are not doing right. This day is a day of good news; if we are silent and wait until the morning light, punishment will overtake us; now therefore come, let us go and tell the king's household."'⁵

³ It is interesting, that despite the totally different understandings of the concept of 'peace' that both *eirene* and *pax* have from *shalom*, nevertheless the way they were used in their respective Greek and Roman cultures had a significant impact on how the early Christian community came to understand the nature of proclaiming the gospel.

⁴ 2Sam 18:24-27

⁵ 2Kings 7:9



▪ Christians: proclaiming *shalom*

It is clear that the Greek, Roman and Hebrew ideas about 'proclaiming of good news' lay the foundations for a New Testament understanding of 'evangelism' and the work of an 'evangelist'.

The centerpiece of a biblical Christian understanding of evangelism is seen in those passages that proclaim the triumph and the victory of God. Without question the primary biblical image of evangelism and the evangelist is found in these words:

How beautiful on the mountains,
are the feet of the one who brings good news,
who heralds peace,
proclaims joyful tidings,
announces salvation,
and tells Zion, "Your God reigns!"
Listen! Your watchmen raise their voices,
they shout for joy together,
for they see Yahweh face to face, as he returns to Zion
Yahweh bares his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God
But you are not coming out in panic,
you are not leaving like fugitives.
Yahweh is going ahead of you,
the God of Israel is your rear guard.
(Isa 52:7-12) ⁶

Yahweh is personally pictured as a herald, running - even dancing - upon the hilltops, ahead of the exiles, leading them home as they return from Babylon to Zion, proclaiming "*Shalom!*" While at the same time protecting and encouraging the stragglers. It is an astonishing image. We are presented here with the truth that it is Yahweh who is always the primary evangelist. All involvement we have in evangelism is simply joining God in leaping across the mountains crying, "*Shalom!*" Leading the lost and the weary home.

The returning exiles are the first fruits of a whole new eschatological age. God is proclaiming a cosmic victory, which will embrace the whole world, establishing justice, salvation and peace. Yahweh's word of proclamation is not just a sound or a statement; it actually has effective power. As at the original creation, the word heralded begins to bring into being a new creation. The word proclaimed is the word, "*Shalom!*"

This sets the scene for Jesus, who comes proclaiming the 'kingdom of God',⁷ which of course is identical to *shalom*:

⁶ Notice the fascinating link across the scriptures between *shalom* and feet!

- 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the one ... heralding *shalom*' (Isa 52:7, cf Na 1:15);
- 'Justice makes a path before him, his footsteps bring *shalom*.' (Ps85:13 / Jerusalem Bible reading)
- '... the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.' (Rm 16:20);
- '... to guide our feet into the way of peace'. (Lk 1:79)
- '... having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace.' (Eph 6:15)



So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off
and peace to those who were near;
for through him both of us have access
in one Spirit to the Father.’
(Eph 2:17-18)

This then is evangelism, the proclamation of *shalom* in all that it means and then working to see it become a reality in people’s hearts, minds, lives, circumstances and communities.

SHALOM ENDOWMENT

Shalom as a gift

Peter, the disciple of Jesus, told a crippled beggar:

“I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give to you ...”
(Acts 3:5)

The good news that is heralded, announced and proclaimed is a gift, something that is given. It is an endowment, it is a bequest that is given and is there to be received. The gospel is a gift and that gift is *shalom* – that which contains every blessing and gift that God ever created and made available.

What is the gospel?

The word ‘gospel’⁸ means ‘good news’ and the ‘good news-gospel’ is *shalom*.⁹

‘Wearing for shoes on your feet
the eagerness to spread the gospel of peace’
(Eph 6:15)¹⁰

In Jesus the typical Jewish greeting and blessing of “Shalom!” is no longer simply a wish or a prayer, it becomes a declaration and a gift¹¹, an offer of the kingdom of God and its eschatological peace which may be received or rejected. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in Jesus’ instructions to the disciples he sends out to the towns and villages in pairs:

‘Whatever house you go into, let your first words be, “Shalom to this house!” And if a person of peace lives there, your shalom will go and rest on them; if not it will come back to you ... Cure those in the town who are sick, and say “The kingdom of God is very near to you”. But whenever you enter a town and they do not make you welcome, go out into its streets and say, “We wipe off the very dust of your town that

⁷ See Mk 1:14-15; Mt 4:23; Lk 4:43-44 *et al*

⁸ The word ‘gospel’ is one of the few Anglo-Saxon words to find a place in theology (the other being ‘atonement’ or ‘at-one-ment’). ‘Gospel’ has been given the meaning ‘good news’ but originally was *god* (good or God) *spel* (story)

⁹ Cf Eph 2:17; 6:15

¹⁰ Jerusalem Bible translation

¹¹ Notice the power of the spoken word in greetings, blessings and prophecy in Hebrew understanding



clings to our feet, and leave it with you. Yet be sure of this that the kingdom of God is very near.” (Lk 10:1-12; cf Mt 10:11-14)

Shalom is salvation. It is clear that the opening declaration, “*Shalom!*” is nothing less than an offer of the kingdom of God and its blessings. It is something tangible that can be embraced and remains, or resisted and missed. The gift of *shalom* as the gift of the kingdom is seen throughout Jesus’ public ministry:

- **shalom and healing:**
 - the woman with the hemorrhage;
“Your faith heals you, go in *shalom*” (Mk 5:34)
- **shalom and forgiveness:**
 - the prostitute washing Jesus’ feet;
“Your faith saves you, go in *shalom*” (Lk 7:50)
- **shalom and generosity:**
 - Zacchaeus redistributing wealth;
“Today has *shalom* (salvation) come to this house” (Lk 19:9)
- **shalom and freedom:**
 - Jesus casting out demons;
“*Shalom!* Come out of him!” (Mk 1:25)
- **shalom and nature:**
 - Jesus stilling the storm;
“*Shalom!* Be still!” (Mk 4:39)
- **shalom and confidence:**
 - Jesus comforting the disciples;
“It is my own *shalom* that I give you” (Jn 14:27)
- **shalom and power:**
 - Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit;
“*Shalom* be with you” (Jn 20:21-22)

Jesus and the gospel

Jesus is the personification of *shalom*. The powerful demonstration of his life, death and resurrection enable all the characteristics of *shalom* to begin to become a reality:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off
have been brought near by the blood of Christ.
For he is our peace;
in his flesh he has made both groups into one ...
So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off
and peace to those who were near;
for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.’
(Eph 2:13-18)

‘... through him to reconcile to himself all things ...
making peace by the blood of his cross’
(Col 1:20)

‘... the doors of the house where the disciples had met
were locked for fear of the Jews.
Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you” ...
Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you ...”



When he had said this he breathed on them and said to them,
“Receive the Holy Spirit ...”
(Jn 20:19-22)

“Go into all the world
and proclaim the good news to the whole creation”
(Mk16:15) ¹²

SHALOM ACTIVISM ¹³ **Evangelism as activism**

‘Blessed are the peacemakers
for they shall be called the children of God’
(Mt 5:9)

‘*Shalom* activism’ is mission. It is dynamic in nature; it actively takes the initiative, working to bring about radical change in harmony with the characteristics of *shalom*. In every situation with which it engages there appear to be five essential steps and principles:

- **Vision:** ‘and of his peace there will be no end’ (Isa 9:7)
- **Passion:** ‘with all the energy he inspires within me’ (Col 1:29)
- **Decision:** the fulcrum, the tipping-point, choice and commitment
- **Action:** ‘the one that believes ... will also do the works that I do’ (Jn 14:12)
- **Transfiguration:** ‘we wait for new heavens and new earth’ (2Pt 3:13)

This is the framework within which ‘*shalom* activism’ unfolds.

¹² This declaration reinforces the truth we have put forward strongly, earlier in this session that the gospel of *shalom* (with atonement and salvation) is not just for people, but also in fact for the whole cosmos.

¹³ During the mid 1970’s I coined the phrase ‘*Shalom* Activism’, along with its sister term ‘*Shalom* Activist’, with the direct purpose of challenging the popular notion that ‘pacifism’ implied being ‘passive’ in the face of violence and that ‘pacifists’ were people who were committed to being passive. The word ‘pacifism’, of course, never had that original meaning, but comes from the Latin *pacificus* meaning ‘to make peace’. However, the popular notion of ‘being passive’, just ‘letting things take their course’ and ‘offering no resistance’ in the face of violence, continues in many quarters. This is due to both:

- The popular mispronunciation of the word as ‘passivism’;
- The widespread belief that (in most cases) there are no really effective alternatives in engaging with violence other than with some form of retaliatory violence.

Having worked with the idea of ‘*shalom* activism’ as the antithesis of ‘violence’ for a number of years, I re-adjusted the vocabulary around the subject. I came to see that the phrase ‘*shalom* activism’, properly understood, had an all-embracing perspective that in reality was better suited to speak of the totality of Christian mission as a whole, rather than restricted to primarily engaging with violence. In the light of this, I coined the phrase ‘assertive meekness’ to refer to an authentic Christian response to violence while using ‘*shalom* activism’ to refer to Christian mission in its fullest sense. This is how we use it here. It is of course a deeply challenging phrase; it demands a radical reappraisal of how both ‘peace activism’ and ‘Christian mission’ have been traditionally perceived, as we shall see.

'*Shalom* activism' is evangelism properly understood. Popularly and historically 'activists' and 'evangelists' have been seen as having little in common; with 'evangelists' often being honoured while 'activists' have frequently been marginalized. Understanding '*shalom* activism' challenges all this.

Exploring *shalom*

'*Shalom* activism' is a call to adventure, experiment, discovery and creativity; it is also a call into the unknown. To live by *shalom* is to live intuitively, spontaneously, instinctively. It is to live on the edge, to live by your wits but also by deep wisdom. '*Shalom* activism' is about exploration and encounter; it is about living by the Spirit, living by values and living in the light of a breathtaking and overwhelming vision.

'*Shalom* activism' is energised by the number of commands and challenges related to 'peace' in scripture; the very word *shalom* was born out of a verb, *shalom* by its very nature must be doing! ¹⁴

- **To 'seek peace'**
 - 'seek peace and pursue it' (Ps 34:14; cf Rm 14:19; Heb 12:14; 1Pt 3:11) ¹⁵
 - 'seek the peace of the city ...' (Jer 29:7)
- **To 'make peace'**
 - '(God) makes peace in his high heaven' (Job 25:2)
 - 'Blessed are the peacemakers' (Mt 5:9)
- **To 'proclaim peace'** ¹⁶
 - 'who proclaims peace' (Isa 52:7)
 - 'he came and proclaimed peace ...' (Eph 2:17)
- **To 'pray for peace'**
 - 'pray for the peace of Jerusalem' (Ps 122:6)
 - 'prayers ... that we might lead a ... peaceable life' (1Tim 2:1-2)
- **To 'live in peace'**
 - 'abide in a peaceful habitation' (Isa 32:18)
 - 'live in peace' (2Cor 13:11)

Peace and political power

Political power can be viewed in one of two ways:

- People dependent upon the good will of the 'few' (rulers / government);
- Government dependent upon the goodwill of the 'many' (people / community).

¹⁴ There are other examples beyond those presented here, a selection of just some of the other phrases are:

- 'go, be sent, or depart in peace'
- 'come, or return in peace'
- 'gift of peace'
- 'covenant of peace'
- 'abundance of peace' ... etc.

¹⁵ The imagery of the 'hunter-gatherer' is compelling.

¹⁶ Also to 'call for peace', 'speak peace' and 'words of peace'.



Nonviolent social-political action works with the second view. People's obedience to rulers / government / state is not inevitable,¹⁷ it is voluntary, it can be withdrawn, they can change their willingness to comply.¹⁸ Nonviolent political action is based on the possibility that 'people do not always do what they are told to do'.¹⁹

Gene Sharp, a leading thinker and analyst of nonviolent political action, points out that such responses refer to a myriad of methods of protest and persuasion, non-cooperation and intervention without the use of physical violence. He insists that it is very much *action*; it does not attempt to ignore or avoid conflict but is rather marked by a very particular way of responding.²⁰

Gene Sharp's summary of points about nonviolent political action have a lot to say about the nature of '*shalom* activism':

- It is very similar to military warfare, requiring strategy, tactics, courage, discipline, sacrifice²¹ and above all confrontation;
- It is 'extra constitutional'; that is that it does not rely on the institutional procedures of the State;
- It does not necessarily need to take a long time to achieve dramatic change; there are significant stories of dramatic changes in situations;
- It has no place for 'passivity', 'submissiveness' or cowardice'; as with militarism they must be removed²²;
- It recognises the human potential for evil as well as good and takes this into account in both its strategies and in welcoming participants;
- It is a response open to 'ordinary people' not the preserve of 'saints'; there just needs to be inspiration and growing understanding²³;
- It has global perspective, historically developed as much in western culture as in the east, from where it is often seen as drawing its inspiration;
- It makes no assumption that the opponent will refrain from using violence against nonviolent action;
- It is a mistake to believe that using nonviolent means makes the cause and action inherently 'good' and 'just', it does not²⁴;
- It can be used in every conceivable social and political situation, whether local or international, democratic or tyrannical;
- It is not a 'magic ritual', there is no guarantee of success, it has often been defeated – for a range of probable reasons²⁵;

¹⁷ An interesting discussion about the reasons why people often comply with the status quo authority is found in G Sharp '***The Politics of Nonviolent Action***' Boston: Porter Sargent 1974 p19-24.

¹⁸ These ideas are developed further *ibid* p 25,30.

¹⁹ See *ibid* p 63.

²⁰ This is a summary of his ideas found *ibid* p 64-70.

²¹ Gandhi in particular makes this point strongly.

²² It is attributed to Ghandi that he said, "Anyone who does not feel that they could kill another human being has no place in the peace movement"! The Shalom Activist feels all the anger and rage that is normal as they choose the path of non-violence that makes them a peace person.

²³ There seems little doubt, however, that participation in nonviolent action will have a significant personal impact on many (if not all) participants.

²⁴ Nonviolence can be used for 'bad' causes, even to justify them, though it must be admitted that the social consequences may be considerably different from what they may have been if violence had been used.

- It needs 'story-tellers' to invade the cultural consciousness, to raise the sense of possibility, to provide heroes and icons as with the military world;

What it is essential for us to do is to reflect on the broad issues raised by nonviolent action in the light of the Christian perspectives of 'shalom activism'.

Making *shalom*

There are myriads of peacemaking stories, more than can be mentioned and far more than have ever been recorded, the archives of '*shalom* activism' are breathtaking! We are taking just three stories as examples of the many in desire to learn from the experience of others. As we look at these stories we want to consider three questions:

- What do they teach us about *shalom*-making methods?
- What do they teach us about *shalom*-making principles?
- What do they teach us about *shalom*-making qualities?

1: PHILIPPINES: people power against a dictator (February 1986) ²⁶

Background

- The Philippines is a land of 7,100 islands, 56 million people and 75 languages. 85% of the population are passionately Roman Catholic.
- 1965 saw the beginning of the dictatorial regime of Ferdinand Marcos, which had strong American backing. There was also growing Communist influence.
- In 1983, when the Philippine opposition leader Benigno Aquino returned from self-imposed exile and stepped from his plane at Manila airport, Marcos forces assassinated him.
- This act led to increasingly widespread protest, hostility and the real potential of civil war if changes were not made.
- Losing popularity among the people, and support from the United States, he decided to hold a snap election on 7th February 1986 to gain a new mandate, either by winning or by rigging the poll. The popular view was that if he won there would be civil war.
- The major opposition parties united behind Cory Aquino, the murdered leader's widow, in an unprecedented challenge for the presidency.
- There was a short campaign, marked by vote-buying and more than 70 opposition election workers were murdered.
- Election day saw ballot-stuffing and the falsification of returns, with some vote counters walking out in disgust in front of national television cameras.

²⁵ This may be due to weakness in technique, strategy and tactics, a lack of internal strength determination and skill; reasons for failure and comparisons with success needs much more study.

²⁶ J Paulson '***People Power Against the Philippine Director***' in G Sharp, (et al) ***Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice And 21st Century Potential*** Boston: Porter Sargent 2005; Jim & Nancy Forest '***Four Days in February***' London: Marshall-Pickering 1988



- Marcos claimed that he had won but Aquino refused to concede. She met with 350 opposition leaders to plan their next move. Cory Aquino rejects all violence and proposed a campaign of what she called 'people power'.
- She planned to hold a memorial service for those who had died during the electoral violence, scheduled for the same day as Marcos' inauguration. There were also plans for a one-day general strike, boycott of all Marco supporting business, delayed payment of utility bills, on-going nonviolent local community action.
- Before this could properly begin a group of reformist army officers prepared a coup against Marcos, but their plan was discovered, so on February 22nd they took refuge in two adjacent military camps with only 300 troops.

"What would you do?"

Involvement

- February 1984, Hildegard and Jean Goss-Mayr (Vice-Presidents of Fellowship of Reconciliation International) were invited to hold seminars on nonviolent action in Catholic churches across the country, which they did for the next two years.
- Cardinal Sin worked to draw together all factions of the Catholic Church to support Cory Aquino for President, sending pastoral letters to the 2,000 national parishes.
- 'Radio Veritas' (Catholic radio) had 17 stations linked across the nation on a single waveband, broadcasting to counter the propaganda from the State media.

Steps taken

- The evening of February 22nd the rebel commanders held a televised press conference, announcing their resignations from the government, withdrawal of support from Marcos, the recognition of Aquino as the legitimate winner of the elections and asking for popular and military support.
- Cardinal Sin, made a Veritas Radio appeal for people to go to the military camps to protect the rebels from Marco's troops and prevent bloodshed. By midnight there were 50,000 people gathered and soon the number was to reach more than a million.
- By 2 pm on February 23rd Marcos sent in the first wave of tanks and armoured transport against the rebels. Protesters, including nuns kneeling in front of tanks and priests climbing on to military vehicles to lead the people (including soldiers) in praying the rosary. Other demonstrators offered the soldiers sweets and cigarettes. Unable to reach the camps without huge civilian deaths the Marcos troops withdrew.
- That evening Aquino went on the radio to encourage continued support, while Marcos tried to persuade the rebel commanders to surrender – they publicly refused.
- On the morning of February 24th the crowds had dwindled to a few thousand. The rebels all consolidated their position in one camp. At dawn Marcos launched another assault, with riot police dispersing some of the crowd they were able to set up an armed fortress in the abandoned camp to threaten the rebel stronghold.
- By mid-morning Marcos' Marine commander is ordered to fire on the rebels, but he refused because thousands of civilians would die. By midday 90% of Marcos' troops had defected with a navy frigate turning its guns on Marcos' palace.



- An assault on the government television station lasted 15 minutes with thousands of unarmed civilians taking it over and beginning to broadcast.

Outcome

- By the afternoon of the 24th February Marcos was planning a last 'suicide attack', the Americans dissuaded him, he stepped down and Cory Aquino became president.

"What can we learn?"

2: EAST GERMANY: the church and the Berlin Wall (1989-1990) ²⁷

Background

- At the end of World War Two, during the period of East Germany's de-Nazification, the Soviet authorities had a relatively moderate attitude towards religion.
- German Communists and the Confessing Church had stood together against the Nazis during the war:
 - There were strong relationships from prison days;
 - Church leaders had secured the surrender of the Nazi commander to the Soviets;
 - Confessing Church leaders increasingly took over from State Church quislings;
 - Church leaders did not emigrate west (like many of the educated class) thus showing solidarity with the people of the East;
 - They stated clearly that they would not be complicit with any State or subject to any government control.
- This position was put to the test in the Stalin era, yet the following decades saw dialogue develop in the areas of ethics (peace, environment, human rights, gay and women's rights) and economics. They walked a tightrope between being a channel for dissent while often interceding between government and those in opposition.
- In 1981 an independent peace movement – a grass-roots association of individuals and groups – emerged, depending on the church for 'space' (for physical meeting and protection from harassment); it received much support and leadership from the church.
- In 1983 the State (DDR) relaxed its emigration policy – many dissidents left, with some 52% being church leaders – leaving a real problem for the church in the East.
- 1985 saw Gorbachev's '*perestroika*' ('re-structuring') bring a more relaxed attitude towards the church, but then there was a counter-reaction by Honecker in the DDR.
- The institutional church began to distance themselves from the peace groups:
 - To lessen the growing political pressure on them;
 - To appease some church traditionalists who felt 'peace' was usurping the liturgy.
- The peace groups began to call themselves 'the Church from Below', and a new church related leadership began to emerge from within these grass-roots peace communities.

"What would you do?"

²⁷ D Johnson (Ed) '*Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*'; Oxford: OUP 1994
See chapter 7; D Steele, '*East German's Churches Give Sanctuary*' 119-152

Involvement

- Late in 1987 the Stasi (secret police) raided the ecology library in the Church of Zion in East Berlin; arresting ordinary people, confiscating books and equipment, accusing them of sedition:
 - Church and independent groups held prayer services for the arrested;
 - Church leaders negotiated the release of some of those arrested.
- Early in 1988 many of those arrested were associated with the church:
 - Prayer meetings were held in fifteen East German cities, including Berlin, Leipzig and Dresden, they were attended by thousands;
 - The church established advice centres throughout the DDR on human rights and emigration;
 - Church leaders supported, often speaking in court to defend, those arrested.
- In May 1989 the elections were closely monitored by church-based groups and shown to be manipulated and fraudulent. Added to this the Honecker regime clamped down on emigration, which created deep internal dissent in the DDR.

Steps taken

- September 1989 the *die Wende* ('the turnaround') began in Leipzig at the weekly Monday night prayer services at St Nicholas' church, with a transition from mass emigration to mass demonstration and calls for political reform. From now on:
 - Pastors across the city, and then the nation, became increasingly vocal about political change, but central to their message was an insistent call to nonviolence;
 - Attendance at prayer meetings escalated across the country, by the end of October there were some 300,000 people meeting at the church of St Nicholas alone!
 - Tension mounted, due to their fear the authorities said that they were planning a solution 'worse than Tiananmen Square', yet the overwhelming commitment of the people to nonviolence and the promise of the Christians to protect the hated Stasi from the crowd, stayed their hand.

Outcome

- As the crisis deepened, the regular and crucial meetings between Church leaders and the authorities, supported by a strong 'moral commitment' of the people, was pivotal.
- As the Honecker regime collapsed the 'round table' gatherings between the remnants of the old regime and the opposition, led and moderated by trusted church leaders in a spirit of reconciliation, became the de-facto administration and enabled a new East German government to be elected peacefully prior to re-unification with the West.
- The message of reconciliation, peace, justice, the integrity of creation and the practice of prayer gave the community, both Christian and secular, a sacred focus.

"What can we learn?"



3: BRAZIL: healing the memories of torture (1979-1985) ²⁸

Background

- In 1964 a coup organised by the Brazilian army brought the country into a period of military rule that was to last for more than 20 years.
- During that period the regime waged a 'terror campaign' against its own people to 'purge out' suspected 'communist' infiltrators.
- Anyone voicing opposition to the regime became a target, including anyone standing up for the rights of the poor and landless, this included journalists and left-wing politicians.
- Central to this State-violence was the systematic use of torture, either to elicit confessions or to silence dissent – thousands of men and women suffered.
- While the violence began to subside towards the end of the 1970's, the crimes that the State had committed were never admitted. To refer to them was taboo and you broke the silence at your peril.
- For those individuals and families that had suffered there was no opportunity or prospect of justice.
- There was also no guarantee that any new military leader might not launch a fresh round of violence and torture against another group of perceived 'subversives'.
- In 1997 a new military administration passed a law giving amnesty to both political prisoners who had suffered and to security agents who had inflicted the torture over so many years.
- While the amnesty for political prisoners was welcomed, the amnesty for the torturers and the agents of terror deeply troubled many people, there seemed no possibility of receiving justice for their suffering.

"What would you do?"

Involvement

- The military regime had kept meticulous records of every person abducted, tortured, interrogated and killed by the security forces – these also included testimony of personal torture ordeals given by the prisoner at military tribunals – it was all seen as simply 'good military record keeping' by the authorities.
- The 1979 Amnesty Law actually provided a 'creative possibility' – unseen by the authorities. Lawyers preparing amnesty petitions for incarcerated political prisoners could view official files, having them out on loan, provided they were returned within 24 hours.
- By 1980 a daring and remarkable plan was set in motion under the protective shadow of the Catholic Archdiocese of Sao Paulo.
- To keep a total blanket of secrecy each of the participants in the scheme only knew what they actually needed to know for their actual task – few had overall knowledge. Everyone was sworn to complete personal secrecy, all important information was passed by word of mouth alone.

²⁸ D Mathews (Ed) *'War Prevention Works'* Oxford: Oxford Research Group 2001; see also www.stoptorture.org



Steps taken

- Lawyers were employed to access the files in the military archive under the pretence of preparing amnesty submission.
- The files were taken to a small office at the centre of Brasilia, which had three photocopiers working 10 hours a day seven days a week; within three years the whole archive, of over a million pages, was copied.
- The photocopied files were then transferred to microfilm and spirited out of the country to the World Council of Churches offices in Geneva; which was also the source of funding for the whole project.
- The findings were condensed into a 7,000-page report, which was then written up in the format of a popular book by two journalists. On 15th July 1985, under the title 'Brazil: Never Again', it was secretly launched in bookshops across the country and was the bestseller for 25 weeks, with some 200,000 copies sold. As it had a joint Brazilian and American publisher the government realised the futility of trying to have it banned.

Outcome

- September 1985, Brazil's newly inaugurated civilian president signed the United Nations Convention Against Torture, due to the impact of the book.
- The names of 444 torturers were released, having a serious affect on them.
- Medical licences of doctors involved in the torture were revoked.
- As one woman said, "Truth for many is as strong as justice."

"What can we learn?"

Peacemaking principles

When we study and analyse the results of numerous peacemaking successes certain key principles begin to emerge. These provide an important guide for the future:²⁹

- **Meeting and talking:** listening, questioning and communicating, building a relationship when most other people can only see violence:
 - Sitting down with the enemy, conquering personal fear;
 - Allowing both sides to give voice to their pain and rage;
 - Looking for points of contact to bring hostile parties together.
- **Support from outside:** making sure that those taking a stand within the situation don't feel isolated and forgotten:
 - Providing physical and psychological support;
 - Individuals from other countries living in communities to deter attacks;
 - Christian Peacemaker Teams (Palestine);
 - Peace Brigade International (Colombia).

²⁹ As identified in Dylan Mathews *'War Prevention Works: 50 stories of people resolving conflict'* pub Oxford Research Group 2002



- **Spirituality:** a significant number of all peacemakers have a strong spiritual motivation for their work:
 - Moral Rearmament, Quakers, Catholics, Protestant activists etc;
 - It inspires them to become involved in the task;
 - They see spiritual sensitivity on both sides deepening dialogue.
- **Trust building:** this is an essential prerequisite before peace building can begin, taking time, wisdom and patience.
- **Business:** commerce and industry can play a vital role, providing incentive, networks and resources for change:
 - El Salvador 'goods for guns',
 - Trade Unions (France / Germany);
 - Palestinians
- **Traditional culture:** this can provide an important vehicle in bring hostile parties together:
 - Somalis valued poetry, story-telling and common heritage.
 - Drama, dance, music.
- **Women:** mothers, wives, grandmothers and sisters frequently provide the impetus and heart for peace, with their persistence, sensitivity and willingness to share the emotions involved:
 - Mothers of the Disappeared;
 - Women in Chile, Somalia, Balkans and so many other places.
- **Evaluating and publishing:** it is essential that the experiences of the peacemaking journey are written down and published so they are remembered and others can learn from them:
 - Story-telling is inspirational;
 - Principles identified through reflection can set patterns for the future.
- **Stimulating governments:** if and where possible peace workers and NGO's should work alongside governments on a multi-track approach; this has proved very effective in a number of areas.
- **Peace initiatives are incredibly cost effective:**
 - 1999 NATO bombing Serbia cost \$4bn plus \$30bn reconstruction;
 - Many peace initiative flounder because of lack of finance;
 - 'Give Peace a Bank' movement (Oxford Research Group);
 - We have Military Academies where are the Peace Academies?

Shalom-making qualities

Historically the Christian church has been a cause of much conflict, but its mission is to be an instrument of radical life-giving change. Christians certainly have no monopoly on peacemaking and work alongside many with different spiritualities and beliefs. The question is what *shalom*-making qualities, potentials and perspectives do Christians particularly have (some of which will of course be shared with peacemakers of other faiths and beliefs):



- Relationship with Jesus;
- Vision of *shalom*
- Identity and vulnerability;
- Compassion and love;
- Strength of meekness;
- Creativity of wisdom;
- Strategy and cunning;
- Fearlessness and courage.

Christian communities of faith have the opportunity to provide a space for moral focus and spiritual inspiration for creative leadership.³⁰

Christian communities of faith must:

- **Be a voice for peace and justice**, without truth there is no trust, with trust the voice of justice can be heard;
- **Move at a pace people can follow**; too fast and support will not keep up, too slow and injustice will remain unchallenged;
- **Mobilise support in the community**, demonstrating the importance of networking and its ability to bring people together;
- **Give long-term support to change**; as a community insider it can follow through the implementation of settlements.

Christian communities of faith have the ability to promote peace because they have:

- **An established record** of humanitarian care and concern;
- **A respected set of values** to under gird contact, discussion and relationship;
- **Ability to change attitudes** in individuals and groups;
- **Unique leverage** to promote reconciliation between conflicting parties;
- **Capacity to mobilise support** locally, nationally and internationally;
- **Ability to follow through** locally after a settlement.

Independent ecumenical groups have the:

- **Freedom** to move quickly and creatively, they are highly motivated;
- **Integrity** to be seen as independent and trustworthy by both sides;
- **Persistence** and tenacity to continue in the face of hostility and violence.

Questions & Reflections

1. In what ways does an understanding of the 'gospel of peace' challenge popular Christian thinking and public understanding about the gospel?

³⁰ Adapted from Douglas Johnson '*Review of the Findings*' in '*Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*' Oxford 1994 p 258-265.



2. What should be the unique characteristics of 'shalom activism'?
3. What distinctive qualities should Christians be able to bring to peacemaking?

Reading and Resources

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