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## Peaceable Witness in Contexts of Conflict

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*“An innate hostility toward God is probably best evidenced by humanity’s  
never-ending impulse to wage war.”*

—Pierre Gilbert<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The world is really in need of peace! The news tells us that peace is really needed everywhere, at all times and in all nations. We receive bad news, trouble, sickness, conflicts and all kinds of information revealing a lack of peace. The world does not really know what peace means.

Because of this the church of Jesus is often called to bear witness in times of conflict. The Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church exists where peace is absent, and can teach us different lessons as a result. The following examples illustrate “contexts of conflict.”



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**Civil war:** The church in Angola suffered decades of civil war. As is common, those in conflict were aided by outsiders with economic or ideological interests. Today the MB Church in North African and Middle Eastern countries again is in a context of violent conflict within, along with outside influencers.

**Regional war:** A civil war began in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the early 1990s which escalated into regional war involving many countries. The MB Church has had opportunity to present a practical peacemaking role.

**Crime-based conflict:** Colombia is notorious for drug cartels that control growing operations and inflict pressure on local farmers and business owners to cooperate with them. Often when people resist, they are forced off their properties and even out of their home towns. Such displacement disrupts communities and local churches as people resettle in cities. The MB Church provides exemplary witness within this context.

**Justice-based conflict:** Colombia (FARC), Peru (Shining Path) and a variety of other countries have guerrilla groups who purport to seek greater justice within the country. Kidnappings and killing are typical strategies and church members often are caught in the middle of an incident. The MB Church has suffered at the hands of such groups and seeks to offer peace-building solutions.

**Land claims:** Panama is an example of ongoing land claims by indigenous people, who also are members of MB Churches. Violence has struck, including the murder of one of their members. The church has been involved with patience and hope despite government indifference and lethargy.

**Religious restrictions and persecution:** While Laos officially supports Christianity, local police or other law enforcement leaders may oppose individual Christians who share the gospel. The MB Church witness has lowered the incidence of crime in some communities and caught the attention of political leaders.

The consequences of conflict situations are far reaching. Poverty, hunger, disease, and homelessness are some of the more obvious. People suffer psychological damage like post-traumatic stress disorders, physical harm, and loss of possessions. Reduced life expectancy, lower birth rates, and other painful consequences affect everyday life. Survivors and their families are tempted to pursue violent solutions.

The church has occasion to introduce *shalom* in many ways, offering a peaceable witness in the context of conflict. *Igreja Evangélica dos Irmãos Menonitas em Angola* (IEIMA – The Mennonite Brethren Evangelical Church in Angola) is one such example.

## Understanding Peace and Conflict

### Peace as Shalom

The concept of peace in Latin, *pax*, means the state of one nation without war; a state of harmony among the members of a group or family. It is relationship, calmness, the tranquility of the soul. In the same way the Greek noun *eirene* refers to the state of calmness of soul, the tranquility of mind, the state of a soul in harmony with oneself as a whole person: mind, soul and spirit, and with others.<sup>2</sup>

The Hebrew *shalom* adds nuance with at least three meanings: First, it refers to the state of victory as read in the story of King Ahab consulting the prophet Micaiah before going to war: “The king says, ‘Put this fellow in prison and feed him with bread and water of affliction until I come in peace’” (1 Kings 22:27–28, Amplified).

Second, it refers to the relationship of “one another” through a sense of justice and equality in sharing things. Isaiah 32:16-17 expresses shalom as justice: “The Lord’s justice will dwell in the desert, his righteousness live in the fertile field. The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever.”

Third, shalom refers to the state of moral and ethical wellbeing, including disciplined behavior. It is to be good, better, and becoming the best. In this way shalom is the wellbeing of a person or family, as the Lord recommended to his disciples: “When you enter a house, first say peace to this house” (Luke 10:5). Peace is the fruit of love as read in Galatians 5:22, the state of being in harmony.

We understand a conflict as a tension among two or more people: a lack of harmony, opposing opinions, and hostility. The main reason for conflicts is that needs are not satisfied.

When conflict arises in a family it should be resolved in love and justice, including looking for the reason for the conflict. What caused the conflict to arise? Who is involved in the conflict (this is merely an initial stage of understanding the conflict)? Further to this we move to ask what interests they have in the conflict. Why are they involved in the conflict or why are they supporting the parts involved? When we understand all these aspects of the conflict we are in a better position to solve the conflict. Usually parts involved know that they want to find peace through mediation, negotiation or traditional methods. Conflict is never altogether good or bad; it is the truth badly understood. In summary, we may understand conflict as lack of peace.

### Conflict Context and Dimensions

We have many conflicts but each has its context and its dimension. The context and dimension are complementary and affect the impact of the conflict. For example, a family conflict over its estate heritage is social in context but its dimensions depend

on the attitude of each part involved in it. There are many contexts in which conflicts arise: social, theological, political, economic, and so on. The Angola civil war context, for example, was political.

The dimension of conflict considers more the depth of conflict and its impact in the society. It is like the hidden part of an iceberg under the surface of the water. Context reflects external elements of the conflict, but dimension is the inner side of the conflict. We must analyze the context of a conflict to see the dimension or roots. The roots of the Angolan civil war are deep, appearing before independence in 1975, evident from pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history.

During the conflict these roots could not easily be removed, and were expressed in emotions and behaviors that could be characterized as simple opposition, strong opposition, and extreme opposition to others on the various issues. It affected the church. For example, two evangelical Christians—Mennonite and Pentecostal—could have opposing views on whether Christians can enlist. A radical Mennonite might say, “I disagree strongly when Christians become soldiers” but a moderate Pentecostal might say “I approve.”

Some important dimensions that affect conflict are psychological, physiological, sociological and economic.

The psychological dimension of conflict often stems from verbal offenses, committed in words or lies which destroy someone’s shalom. They can be hard words that the other side cannot support. They may be hidden secrets publicly revealed to create shame.

The physiological dimension stems from armed and non-armed violence. It can be an attack on an individual or it may be collective—communities may be attacked and destroyed, affecting many people at once. Physical attack may trigger ill health. Its impact can easily touch the mind and the psychological dimension. One sociological dimension of conflict stems from the military defense of a politically organized society (e.g. a civil war or war between two states). This dimension is more disastrous, destroying human lives, materials, and economic resources.

How can the witness of peace make a difference in this kind of context? Can the church actually rise above its context in order to be a witness? Let us consider the church in the Angolan conflict and its witness in that context.

### **The Angola Case Study**

Beginning in pre-colonial times and continuing through the post-colonial period, traumatic experiences have created much frustration for Angolans. They have inherited customs that have led to extreme violence. A Leninist kind of Marxism that led to decades of civil war was introduced in the post-colonial period (1980s).

Churches were not spared the impact of such policies. In fact some churches adopted a Marxist ideology as a method and model of leadership.

It was during this period that Rev. Makami Mpovi started the MB work in Angola. Much hatred was present between brothers, even between Christians. Angolans who had fled to the Congo were not given easy access in returning to their own country. Once there, the reception by fellow countrymen was often one of hatred. A pejorative term “*langa*,” referring to Angolans returning from Congo who were not welcome, is illustrative of the hatred that was common in daily experience.<sup>3</sup>

The long period of civil war did not allow an adequate education for most Angolans. This created an inferiority complex among some and a feeling of superiority among others. Angolans were wounded and need time to heal with the assistance of others.

This lack of education extends also to theological training. Few leaders with national influence have understood the importance of well-trained ministers for Angola. Some Angolans went to Congo to study but received little support. In some cases indifference to theological education has turned into rejection of those who have advanced training.

Other cultural factors are also significant. Those who initiated church planting in Angola were from a Congo tribe that follows matriarchal kinship. But the father has an important, even divine, role within Angolan traditional beliefs. The biblical story also reflects strong patriarchal traditions. Some Angolan national leaders experienced grave difficulties and even pain when they were challenged and replaced by their own spiritual sons and younger leaders. This was humiliating for them.

The civil war affected the churches in both context and all dimensions. Much was destroyed in terms of lives and relationships, not to mention property. The Angolan church demonstrates ways that witness can be expressed in the context of such storm.

### **The Broader Church Witness**

The church of Angola was compromised from the beginning following independence. The three political leaders were Protestant Christians: Dr. Antonio Agostinho Neto was the son of a Methodist pastor, Holden Roberto was a Baptist member, and Jonas Savimbi was a son of a Congregational pastor.<sup>4</sup> Practically speaking their churches turned into cells of their political parties and sustained the pre-colonial conflict based on tribal division.

An awakening came when church leaders found that their infrastructures were being destroyed. They knew it was time to open their mouths and call for peace. The formation of the Inter-ecclesial Committee for Peace in Angola (COIEPA) developed

a new force in Angola for which Archbishop Zacharias Kamwenho was awarded the Nobel Prize for peace.<sup>5</sup> This ecumenical platform was formed by three coalitions: *Conferência Episcopal de Angola e São Tomé* (CEAST, Roman Catholic), *Conselho das Igrejas Cristãs em Angola* (CICA, Protestant) and *Aliança Evangélica de Angola* (AEA, Evangelical). It was needed to provide a chance for peaceable witness in the compromised context.

Angolan history is known by the civil war conflict with many peace agreements. These agreements were initiated not by churches but by politicians. So how should churches bring the gospel to people overwhelmed in violent civil war?

A personal example illustrates: In 1996, I returned into my country from our refuge in Congo and started a local church plant in Luanda. In 1998 one of our members traveled outside of Luanda to sell dried fish—his livelihood. He was killed in public by a rebel military gang because he refused to give them the fish they demanded from him. This kind of incident was repeated numerous times.

This is why the formation of COIEPA—the awakening of the sleeping church—was so critical for peaceable witness as a holistic mission process which does not exclude others. This idea has its detractors. Michael G. Comerford observed that the involvement of AEA and CICA (Protestant councils of Christian Churches) in making political statements should be considered a betrayal of its Christian mission.<sup>6</sup> But it was needed to realize God has called his disciples to be witnesses in all levels of society and all social classes. Peace is central to the message of the Lord's mission. Without peace the gospel by itself would be incomplete. In the case of Angola, how should churches share the gospel without its central element?

Church leaders awakened by God's grace took a stand to call for peace, and to end hostility and violence in Angola. Through COIEPA peaceful marches and ecumenical worship events were organized in Luanda in public places. Leaders were commissioned to meet the president, the leader of UNITA (the opposition party), and "belligerents" of the civil war. Through negotiations, dialogue and written messages church leaders influenced the government and other party leaders.

COIEPA's efforts were not without controversy. Comerford critiques the churches' acceptance of the protocols and accords of the political leaders. He believes they compromised themselves for peace. "The churches warmly welcomed the Gbadolite Accords. AEA and CICA congratulated the Angolan President on securing peace for Angola and practising a politics of forgiveness."<sup>7</sup> But a critical question is: did the church leaders have a place in these negotiations or the decision-making? Comerford also noted: "In 2000 COIEPA put forward a considered proposal, suggesting a panel of twelve members to explore possible avenues to building peace."<sup>8</sup>

It is not necessary to always be seated in public political meetings. The more important role is to communicate what God wants us to do, and say it to whomever he sends us to. We are called to communicate the whole gospel to the whole person in the whole society.

One example is to consider the contributions of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Zechariah, Haggai, Malachi, and probably Esther to the restoration of Israel. All these books illustrate contributions they made in so many different ways, at political and “grass-roots” levels. Restoration was achieved as the “whole gospel for the whole person in the whole society.”

### **The Mennonite Contribution**

The Mennonite contribution was there but very tiny. It had minimal impact on the political side, but a little more in social and civilian society.

Mennonite Central Committee and CICA (the main partner of MCC in Angola) went together to visit all the provinces of Angola with the distribution of food to the neediest starving people during the war. They offered food in exchange for weapons.

In 1998 the Bible Institute for Missiology of Angola (IBMA), together with MCC held a week-long *Seminar of Peace* in the Centre of Training and Culture in Angola known as “CEFOCA.” About 100 participated from the three Mennonite Conferences: Evangelical Mennonite Brethren (IEIMA), Mennonite Community Church (Igreja Comunidade Menonita em Angola: ICMA), and the Evangelical Mennonite Church (Igreja Evangélica Menonita em Angola: IEMA).

In 2002 IBMA organized a colloquium on *Mission and Peace* at the Kimbanguist conference center. Leaders of the political parties were invited to participate but few of them participated. The meeting was well attended by Christians.

In 2003 MCC published a peacemaking training manual for election monitors, and then trained them in many seminars all over the provinces.

While the Mennonite churches attempted to help with messages of peace, they also were affected by the conflicted context. The struggle for power has been a significant issue for the MBs.

The IEIMA experience from 1986-1991 shows conflict arose over the application of a major financial gift from the North American MB Church. The incumbent leader was challenged for his practice of independently deciding where the money was to go, for lack of accountability, and for abuse of authority. The MB conference split into two parts. Each side used the strategy of accusing the other of having ties to UNITA, the rebel force. Such allegations could easily lead to death. In 1990 the split became permanent, where the founder of the MB conference no longer

was part of IEIMA. A form of reconciliation was achieved and IEIMA was able to hold general assemblies.

During 2000-2007 there was further division again over IEIMA leadership. The once-marginalized Luzembo Segueira was elected general secretary in 2000. But his leadership was challenged by Jose Ngola Muinga, leading to another division. Eventually, however, Ngola's leadership was broadly affirmed, and reconciliation between Ngola and Luzembo (and others) has been achieved through several meetings.<sup>9</sup>

IEIMA is not the only Mennonite conference that coped with storms, looking for peace. IEMA also went through a great deal, though this seems to be solved with the founding of the inter-church Anabaptist conference in Angola (CIMA—*Conferencia Inter-Menonita em Angola*). Such church conflicts compromise a peaceable witness. But even with a partial witness the church can still achieve its peace mission.

Overall, the churches are known for their contribution to peace in Angola even though the military typically claim credit (the death of UNITA rebel leader Savimbi is known as the end of hostility). Still, many issues need a peace witness. Where the church could make unique contributions are in the democratization and participation in civil society (based on commitments to the priesthood of all believers and to education), demobilizing/disarming/re-integrating military participants and child soldiers (based on values of mercy and victim-offender reconciliation), and helping to heal past traumas.<sup>10</sup>

## Outcomes of Peaceable Witness

When peace is restored, those who were as enemies will come together. Peace is very complex. Even creation is included (Rom. 8:19-22). Isaiah wrote: "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together" (Isa. 11:6). This is the effect of peace. Peace brings many good things and it really is a rainbow, as South Africans said after apartheid.

It also should be said that we do not understand exactly what peace is if we have not been in a situation of storm, in danger, or ill health, and come out of this kind of situation to experience calm. The case of Angola shows how bad it was for all Angolan Christians and non-Christians, many of whom left Angola, wandering and looking for peace as refugees. But when peace came, everybody experienced joy and shouted in the street.

How did peace come in Angola? One died for the nation to reach that stage of peace. Comerford wrote that the death of Jonas Savimbi on February 22, 2002 transformed the political landscape of Angola and created new possibilities for peace.<sup>11</sup>



Our theology of peace understands this from Hebrews 9:22: “Without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” Many Angolans died but the death of Jonas Savimbi as well as that of the first president, Dr. Antonio Agostinho Neto, brought dramatic changes. The latter’s death brought freedom to Christianity, which was in danger. Lutiniko wrote: “It is important to compare the death of Dr. Agostinho Neto to that of Jonas Savimbi since both opened new opportunities in Angolan history.”<sup>12</sup>

What happened after Savimbi’s death? On March 13, 2002 a ceasefire came into effect at midnight, UNITA was demilitarized, and the Luena Memorandum was signed on April 4. The process of reconciliation started in power-sharing all over the territory by political parties. Economic activities followed freely. Churches and other Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO’s) were free to perform their activities. Angolans traveled around the country to visit their lost family members in greater security. I had the opportunity to see my mother in 2004 together with my sisters and my nephews who were subject of our prayers for years—we did not know if they were killed or still alive. We thanked God to meet each other. The political dimension of peace offers many opportunities.

What is happening with MBs in Angola? Peace in mission was experienced at the last general assembly (in 2013). Pardon was requested by both sides, with recognition of guilt and lack of maturity in the resolution of conflict. It was obvious that the 2013 General Assembly was the first one held in peace. Now IEIMA has a new peaceful experience. We are learning from each other how good it is to be together, sharing leadership and seeing the church grow in spiritual and material ways. (A deeper analysis will show that members from other backgrounds from Malange and Lunda provinces, who came to Luanda in this time of peace, are agents of this change in IEIMA). Our friends around the world who are interested to invest in the Lord’s field cannot be afraid to do that for the Lord’s glory. Something new is being experienced in IEIMA.

After three decades of civil war a healing process is needed, with new initiatives to implement the healing process. We have members who suffered the loss of their beloved husbands, fathers, mothers and children. Their minds are still coping with traumatic experiences. We need reconciliation centers to teach peaceful cohabitation of citizens or to host interreligious encounters for church leaders on this subject. We need poverty alleviation among Angolans (still a major issue). Human rights education is needed all over the country so people understand basic rights and are able to defend them by nonviolent methods. And urban centers like Luanda need new church plants which are adapted to the new “city style” of members according to God’s will.

## **Summary and Recommendations**

We summarize with a few comments and then recommend several points to stimulate readers to action and application. These recommendations are for civil authorities for the Lord's glory and for people's benefit.

### **Summary**

Conflict must be understood both in its context and its dimension. The case of Angola illustrates this, where COIEPA was a very important contribution of churches for peace building, and the MBs' (IEIMA) role within that. The outcome of peace is like a stream of water in the desert: it brings calmness, stability and joy, and gives opportunities for people to work. Within this we considered the MB reconciliation experience. We also observed the "big picture:" peace in Angola opened many opportunities not only for churches to execute their activities but also for NGOs and economic institutions to operate in Angola. The outcome of peace is seen in many economic activities all over the country. We also need to understand that our task has not yet ended.

### **Recommendations**

Now that peace has come what shall we do? Churches have great responsibilities not only of saving souls but of proclaiming the whole gospel for the whole person and for all creation. Churches need to know what God wants his body to do and they need also to know what God asks for them on behalf of his people.

"Peace be with you! As the father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). We have been commissioned by the Lord to proclaim the gospel of peace to the world. Churches, as Christ's body, need to obey God's command to heal sickness, to set free those who are in the jail of the devil, and to reconcile people with God in Christ Jesus and with their fellow man and woman. Church members should shine in the world as light and be salt to keep the world shining and to have the saltiness of the Lord.

To the state we recommend: Be a peacekeeper. Establish justice among the people. This is why God established the authorities in the world: to correct those who are rebels, not only to God but also to the state and others. Justice should be done; this is the duty of the state. We need peace with God, with neighbor, with family and even within ourselves – for the glory of God.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Pierre Gilbert, “Engaging Worldviews” in this volume, footnote 48.
- <sup>2</sup> Philippe NSINGI MAYAMBU, “Mission et Paix: La Résolution des Conflits au Sein de la tribu Ntandu, Une Etude Exégétique de Jean 20:21” (unpublished thesis, Centre Universitaire de Missiologie, Kinshasa, 2009), 4.
- <sup>3</sup> Lutiniko Landu MIGUEL PEDRO, “The Mennonite Brethren Church in Angola,” in *The Mennonite Brethren Church Around The World: Celebrating 150 Years*, ed. Abe J. Dueck (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2010), 180.
- <sup>4</sup> Lutiniko Landu MIGUEL PEDRO, “The Reconciliation Ministry Comparative Study of the TRC in South Africa and the Memorandum of Luena in Angola” (PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2008), 107. Accessed February 10, 2015, <http://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/25011/Complete.pdf?sequence=9>.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid, 2.
- <sup>6</sup> G. Michael Comerford, *The Peaceful Face of Angola: Biography of a Peace Process (1991 – 2002)*, (Windhoek: John Meinert Printing, 2005), 27.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, 60.
- <sup>8</sup> Lutiniko Landu MIGUEL PEDRO, “Mennonites and Peace-Building in Angola,” in *Freedom’s Distant Shores*, ed. R. Drew Smith (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 132.
- <sup>9</sup> PEDRO, “Mennonite Brethren,” 176-179.
- <sup>10</sup> PEDRO, “Reconciliation,” 100.
- <sup>11</sup> Comerford, *Peaceful*, 17.
- <sup>12</sup> PEDRO, “Reconciliation,” 100.

## Recommended Reading

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### Study Questions

1. Violent conflict characterizes much of our world. By contrast North Americans have not experienced this kind of violence. As a result, their hold on our peace conviction may be weaker. This affects peace teaching and shalom strategies in mission because many missionaries in the early twenty-first century come from N. America. What approaches to teaching and cultivating the way of peace are needed in order to equip any missionary to understand the critical place of the peace witness in violent contexts?
2. Consider the above question in light of the many scenarios and illustrations in the second section, "Understanding Peace and Conflict." How should missionaries approach these scenarios?
3. Again, consider the above in light of the section, "The Angola Case Study," especially the first page which reflects on sources of internal church conflict, and then the sections outlining the impact of the state affairs on the church (notably the conflicts which characterized church elections, for one example).