Introduction

The World Council of Churches (WCC) has had a concern for peace-making since its inception in 1948. At the 1998 Eighth Assembly in Harare the WCC decided to initiate an “Ecumenical Decade to Overcome Violence” from 2001 to 2010. The new initiative aims to provide “a truly ecumenical space, a safe space for encounter, mutual recognition, and common action, along with people of other faiths and all people of good will.”

This article will introduce and locate the Ecumenical Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV) in the context of the Harare Assembly and two of its events: the new ecumenical charter document “Towards a Common Understanding and Vision” and the Recommendations adopted in response to the pre-Assembly Festival that closed the 1988-1998 Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women.

Using the strategy of recovering dangerous memories for the sake of the common good, I will point to potentially problematic aspects of the DOV in the context of this new ecumenism. I conclude by affirming the need to build cultures of peace.

Turning a Corner in Harare: Common Understanding and Vision as Context for DOV

“Towards a Common Understanding and Vision” (CUV) marked the fiftieth anniversary of the World Council of Churches in Harare. It was presented as a significant milestone in an ongoing journey of self-reflection on the nature and purpose of the ecumenical movement in general and of the WCC’s vocation in particular. It aims to rekindle the ecumenical vision amidst uncertainty and crisis. This document is significant for framing a new ecumenical charter which member churches can affirm in the new millennium. In this statement there is agreement that the term “ecumenical” embraces the following three aspects: the quest for Christian unity; common witness in the worldwide task of mission and evangelism; and commitment to diakonia and to the promotion of justice and peace (CUV, 2.2). The key metaphor throughout the document is “a living fellowship of churches” where local ecclesial relations are foregrounded within a concern for the whole of creation. It makes clear that the Council “as a fellowship of churches is an organization through which its members act together, not a body which acts separately from the churches” (3.1.2.1). The document also acknowledges that there is a continuing tension and sometimes antagonism between those who would advocate the primacy of the social dimension of ecumenism and those who advocate the primacy of spiritual or ecclesial ecumenism (CUV, 2.5).

The idea of the church as a community of people, living as a fellowship among one another and rooted in the koinonia or community of the Triune God, is the keystone of this recent ecumenical discussion. In To Be the Church, Konrad Raiser, General Secretary, puts more flesh on these ecclesial bones in his outline of the current state of ecumenical relations within the World
Council of Churches. In particular he notes three epochal challenges that have stirred this ecumenical framing: globalization, the need to shape a life-centred vision, and pluralism. Raiser finds hopeful a koinonia ecumenical ecclesiology in its affirmation of a relational rather than an institutional ethos. A fellowship model of ecumenism is favoured because “[t]he diversity of gifts present in that community is more important than its institutional ordering.”

This is the sort of “ecumenical space” that is imagined, a place of forming identity as Christians whose “ethical wisdom is transmitted in stories, symbols, parables, and examples rather than in authoritative teachings.” Ecumenical space encourages Christian communities to engage in ecumenical and wider human communities, especially in forming alliances within civil society.

The CUV initiates a shift in ecumenical methodology, from its more pronounced former role as a directly involved program and funding agency (e.g., The Programme to Combat Racism) to one that primarily facilitates and links fellowships and “ecumenical spaces” on behalf of churches to “equip it to undertake certain specific elements of the ecumenical vocation” (CUV, 3.16.4). The intention of this ecumenical shift is to build relationships in a world of brokenness and the crisis of communities and to reanimate local ecumenical relationships – in worship, institutions, congregations, ministries and mission – in order to face a world in the grip of growing “cultures of violence.” The WCC programmatic responses to worldwide spreading forms of violence in recent years include the Programme to Overcome Violence, launched in Johannesburg, 1994; the Peace to the City Campaign, mandated in Brazil, 1996, and the Joint Study Process on Theological Perspectives on Violence and Non-Violence held in 1998.

The Festival to Close the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women

Another major agenda of the Harare Assembly was the closure of the Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women. I will focus here on the connection with violence. The final letter from the pre-Assembly Decade Festival to the Harare Assembly was entitled “From Solidarity to Accountability.” It included this significant theological claim: Violence in the church is an offence against God, humanity and the earth. The Letter called on the Assembly to announce to the world that violence against women is a sin. The Assembly did concur and went on to recommend “that the churches be encouraged to provide opportunities for women to speak out about the issues of violence and abuse where both the victims and the perpetrators of violence can experience the power of forgiveness and reconciliation. The need is recognized for repentance for actions and omissions with regard to the inclusivity of women and the violence to which many have been victims.”

While the Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women is officially ended, its agenda is clearly unfinished and some seeds are being planted in the Decade to Overcome Violence process.

The Decade to Overcome Violence:
Goals, Aims and Theological Framework

On the last frenetic day of the Harare Assembly, when Fernando Enns of the German Mennonite church stood up to propose that 2001-2010 be a Decade to Overcome Violence, the Assembly summarily approved the motion. From this action springs the September 1999 official declaration by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches of the Decade to Overcome Violence – Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace. Consistent with the CUV, the basic theological premises and working framework are demonstrated in the following excerpts:

We are convinced: the churches are called to provide to the world a clear witness to peace, reconciliation and nonviolence, grounded in justice ... But we are also aware that Christians and churches have added, through word and actions, to growing violence and injustice in a world of oppression and graceless competition ... As we engage in constructive efforts to build a culture of peace, we know that we are required to embark upon a deep process of change, beginning with repentance and a renewed commitment to the very sources of our faith...

In order to move peace-building from the periphery to the centre of the life and witness of the church and to build stronger alliances and understanding among churches, networks, and movements which are working toward a culture of peace, the goals of the Decade to Overcome Violence are:

– Addressing holistically the wide varieties of violence, both direct and structural, in homes, communities, and in international arenas and learning from the local and regional analyses of violence and ways to overcome violence.
– Challenging the churches to *overcome the spirit, logic, and practice of violence*; to relinquish any theological justification of violence; and to affirm anew the spirituality of reconciliation and active nonviolence.

– Creating a new understanding of *security* in terms of cooperation and community, instead of in terms of domination and competition.

– Learning from the *spirituality and resources for peace-building of other faiths* to work with communities of other faiths in the pursuit of peace and to challenge the churches to reflect on the misuse of religious and ethnic identities in pluralistic societies.

– Challenging the *growing militarization* of our world, especially the proliferation of small arms and light weapons.

In its recent deliberations on the DOV, the Justice, Peace and Creation Advisory Group named violence as one of the most destructive forms of the misuse of power, and one which accompanies other forms of oppression such as racism and sexism. While focusing all its attention on the need and initiatives to overcome violence, this Decade to Overcome Violence will place a special emphasis on structural and systemic forms of violence. It will also give a special expression to the voices, concerns and visions of the marginalized communities such as women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, racially and ethnically discriminated people, the Dalits in India, and differently abled persons. This approach recognizes that reconciliation requires a process of reparation, restitution and reconstitution which is accompanied by the reconciling of memories and communities across deeply entrenched differences.

The methodology of the DOV aims to provide a platform to share stories and experiences, develop relationships and learn from the positive experiences of the churches and groups working to overcome violence. Part of the contribution of building cultures of peace involves listening to the stories of those who are the primary victims of violence, especially people who are poor, women, youth and children, persons living with disabilities, and Indigenous Peoples, and learning from them about the kinds of skills and creativity that are necessary for survival and resistance of violence, including the destruction of nature.

The DOV is now a Council-wide program involving all units of the WCC. It will be launched by the Central Committee in January 2001. The prospect of a global impact depends on the active participation of all units. Setting up an international network of church and related peace organizations to sustain and promote the agenda of the Decade, and ensuring that the Decade continues to draw its strength and support from the initiatives of local groups, will require planning, coordination, mid-Decade visits based on the model of the Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women, and follow-up. In a recent Justice, Peace and Creation Advisory Group, the purpose of the Decade to Overcome Violence was discussed in terms of violence as a symptom of the prevalence of unequal and unjust relationships. It also specified that the work of the DOV will be informed by and build on the insights gained and lessons learned from the Council’s earlier programs of the Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women and the Peace to the City Campaign.

Another aspect of the DOV is to enable the insights gained from biblical and experiential theological reflections on violence to influence the process and content of the DOV. Two consultations have already taken place: one in Boston, in 1998, and a second, follow-up consultation in Colombo, Sri Lanka, one of the seven cities in the WCC Peace to the City Campaign. Five theological themes were identified for further reflection in the context of churches involved in the Decade to Overcome Violence: Identity, Unity and Diversity; Forgiveness and Reconciliation: A Healing Process Towards Shalom; Texts and Contexts: “Reading” Together for Shalom; Theological Language, Symbol, Ritual and Image; and Becoming Sanctuaries of Courage: Overcoming Violence in Church and World. All churches becoming involved will be encouraged to focus on one or more of these themes.

The Excluded Must Be Heard and Their Voices Not Forgotten

How one reads the DOV will obviously depend on where one is standing, in which communities of accountability and with what loyalties, theological and otherwise. I do not want to be dismissive of the positive value and power of hearing and valuing local experiences and bringing them together into new ecumenical spaces. Some cautions, however, can be raised about the DOV operating within a model of ecumenism as “a way of working strategically with churches.” If mission is theologically defined as a local concern, might it not consequently mean that the more concerted overarching and defining issues will be lost?
While “fellowship ecumenism” (aimed to refocus on local churches as its primary interest rather than following a more hierarchical WCC institutional model) is a positive step calling churches to re-member as Body of Christ locally, it may ironically lead to the exclusion of certain critical voices, voices that have been disbarred from local communities. Will marginal people or those already pushed out of the acceptable frame of “local fellowship of churches” be once again left out? The process could lead to an uncritical pluralism where all experiences may simply be gathered together and not lead to a critically engaged common witness that has the capacity to challenge the ecclesial status quo. People at the margins and those in solidarity with them will rightly ask questions such as these: How will violence be defined? From whose perspective? How will the reading of the signs of the times from the vantage point of victims be included ecclesially and methodologically if these victims have been mostly silenced and are absent from the “fellowship”?

One strategy to focus on issues of power and privilege in the new ecumenism of spaces of localized fellowship is to keep present the subversive memory and practices of the voices most affected by violence. Historically, important work has been done by the WCC, especially throughout the Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women where violence against women emerged as a chief concern. But it is also clear that this struggle is far from over. While it is now seen officially as important to carry this work further, the theological implications of violence against women and the theological justifications for the silence of the church are yet to be addressed. To this end, a new study process – “Being Church: Women’s Voices and Visions” – was proposed at the recent consultation of the Women’s Advisory Group. The purpose of this process is to name and affirm women’s voices and visions and to bring these before the churches as contributions to the renewal and greater unity of the church. The vision is described well in the Sri Lanka Consultation on Theological Perspectives on Violence under the theme of “Becoming Sanctuaries of Courage: Overcoming Violence in Church and World” which hopes to restore women and those most vulnerable to the narratives and analyses of actions against violence. Hear, for example, the voice of a woman survivor of domestic and sexual abuse:

> I long for the church to be a supportive community, hospitable and welcoming, celebrating life and God. A community of courage, which does not hide from, or conceal suffering, willing to challenge the causes of violence. If only the church could see human potential and diversity as sources of honest struggle and enrichment. And if only it could truly create a safe space to be just who we are, made by God, redeemed in Christ, living with Spirit.

The overwhelming reality of violence, in all its manifestations, presents a fundamental challenge to our ways of being church. Because the world is broken and divided by poverty, oppression and the structures of domination and exclusion (e.g. patriarchy and globalisation) so also are the human institutions of the church. Most people in our world are denied basic justice and rights. They are silenced spectators of their own stories. Fullness of life and the flourishing promised by God are diminished and destroyed. The fearful consequences of brokenness bear most heavily on women, children and groups so often marginalised or excluded by the church. We ask, “whose church is it?” The churches are encouraged and challenged to embark on an urgent process of self-critique and recovery of their peacemaking ministry. We believe that we are called by the gospel to build communities characterised by honest, just and transparent relationships with God, with one another and with the whole of creation. By our presence in the midst of human society in all its messy complexities, we keep company with those who struggle to overcome injustice and violence. The incarnate God is encountered in these hard places, and in communities (within and beyond the boundaries of institutional religion) which seek to integrate all the spiritual and material dimensions of God’s creation. The voices of victims and survivors of violence affirm that sanctuary, hospitality, accompaniment, and boldness in naming and confronting the roots and causes of violence are marks of a faithful church. How shall we seek to transform (in our specific contexts and in partnership with others) the structures, systems and attitudes, which obstruct our faithfulness to God’s vision of shalom for all humankind and creation, as revealed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ? How shall the church be disturbed by love and anger, and energised with
life-giving Holy Spirit, so that we can truly engage with the call to overcome violence?

This statement is a subversive reminder to face the complicity of churches in violence when they prefer to focus on the violent ways of the world but not of the churches. It also challenges the churches to repent and be accountable to those harmed both within and beyond. The Harare Assembly called violence against women a sin; “Being Church” is one important process to address seriously this sin in the new ecumenism of local spaces and fellowship.

Conclusion

Following the aim of the DOV, Christian believers will want to build “cultures of peace.” Peace is practical. It grows at the grassroots level, and is nurtured by the creativity of people in cooperation with civil society and wider global networks. In this process, a different ecumenical paradigm is underway critically renewing the understanding of “the WCC as a fellowship of churches.” If the DOV is to create ecclesially and politically critical bases, it will need to deconstruct the kind of fellowship language that is reduced to purely local meaning or internal preoccupations, ignoring “prophetic diakonia” with its advocacy and accountability. The new WCC structure of linking fellowships of local churches can rightly celebrate the local because under conditions of postmodern globalization we urgently need to rebuild communities. At the same time, some critical questions emerge: Are their priorities to be tested through a wider common discernment process asking whose voices are missing, how is violence defined, and who detects the key causes of violence in local context? Is there a chance for churches to challenge each other? Given the shifts since Harare, what are conceived to be the different levels of ecumenical action? When the DOV is launched in January 2001 it will be grounded in the koinonia model, aiming to offer a space for resurrection energy where churches are not the sum of parts making the whole but empowered to re-member the Body of Christ broken and crucified by violence. Here the churches are rooted locally, yet connected more broadly and alert to mutual challenge and change.

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1 In preparing this article I was grateful for lively conversations with Rev. Chris Ferguson, General Secretary of Division of World Outreach, United Church of Canada. I am indebted to his critical insights especially relating to the local-global nexus of the new ecumenism and to supporting the promise of gender focus. He was a delegate to the Harare Assembly and is a member of the WCC Advisory Group on Regional Relations Committee.

2 Message by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, “The Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace” (Geneva: September 1999), 4.


5 Konrad Raiser, To Be the Church: Challenges and Hopes for a New Millennium (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 43-44.


7 The Boston consultation was held under the framework of the Programme to Overcome Violence and organized jointly with the Faith and Order Commission. See also Margot Kaessmann, Overcoming Violence: The Challenge to the Churches in All Places (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998).

8 World Council of Churches, Eighth Assembly, Assembly Committees, “Response to the Plenary on the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women: Recommendations (Adopted),” nos. 1 and 2. This document can be accessed online at <http://www-coe.org/wcc/assembly/ fpwc2e-e.html>.

9 All excerpts come from the Message by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, “The Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace” (Geneva: September 1999). This includes its Working Document “A Basic Framework for the Decade to Overcome Violence”.

Summer 2000 / 5