

THE CHURCH FOR WORLD PEACE AND JUSTICE: REFLECTIONS FROM WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES (WCC)

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ABSTRACT

This article focused on the role of the church as an ecumenical movement in building, promoting and sustaining justice and peace, leading to experience of just peace in the world. The motivation for the article emerged from the ever-increasing loss of justice and peace in our world of the 21st century resulting in the collapse of peace. The aim of the article is to quicken the churches around the world of the need to re-invigorate their effort toward rescuing creation from total annihilation from the threatening life-denying loss of just peace that is claiming the lives of both human and inhuman creation. This study concludes that while life-taking challenges overtake creation, churches around the world seem to fall away from their divine mandate to promote justice and peace in our world. It was recommended that the choice of World Council of Churches and other such organizations should continue with their traditional efforts in taming violence in our world. It was also recommended that churches should strive to promote justice and peace. This will ensure that human life is treated as if it was meant to be as the Creator intended.

Keywords: Church, Justice, Peace, World Council of Churches,

Introduction

The life-denying global crises, confusions, and experiences that have overtaken the human family are fed by human tendencies. These are reflected in the destruction of life and property, and untold hardships seen in growing rate of migrants and refugees across the globe. These unnatural events could be blamed on gross global loss of justice and just peace. The strongest justice voice that seems to be rising against these waves of crises emerges from the Ecumenical Movement and the World Council of Churches (hereafter WCC). Justice and peace are the cry and urgent need of the universe in the 21st Century. Peace and justice are dire need in every facet of human endeavour, cultural, economic, political, and ideological, religious, and cultural issues around gender inequality. In its frantic effort to promote justice in the world by calling for the will of God to be done in the lives of people. The WCC has been actively involved in putting in place several peace and justice programmes to promote justice and peace within the human family.

This frantic effort has been a helpful step though it has not been without its challenges both from within and without its organization and the member-churches. The International Ecumenical Peace Convocation held in Kingston in 2011 affirmed that "Churches must help in identifying the everyday choices that can end abuse and promote human rights, gender justice, climate justice, economic justice, unity and peace" (Hewitt, 2013: 43). There is a definite linkage between peace and justice. As Hewitt (2013) asked rhetorically, "How is there going to be peace when there is no justice? Someone is taking more than their share, of the bounties of this land and that is not fair" (Hewitt, 2013: 108). In one of the key programmes the WCC and the Ecumenical Movement have produced over the years, this challenge has been dealt with continuously. This is because they pose a threat to justice and peace. It thus becomes necessary to investigate the role the church can play in ensuring world peace and justice.

Disorderliness in Current Civilization

It is pertinent that the WCC started with what the mission of God means for the human society, especially when confusion seems to overtake and deny people the experience of justice and peace. This programme was developed during the first Assembly of the WCC in Amsterdam, 1948, with the main aim of reassessing the essence and function of the gospel in addressing the realities which militate against justice and peace in the world. Because the programme aimed at emphasizing the gospel's realistic impact on the life of people in concrete contexts of injustice, Reinhold Niebuhr, with his Christian Realism approach, was highly influential in the development of the WCC's social thought (Niebuhr, 1948: 278). Two forms of political religions dominated the minds of the people at that time: morally cynical worship of force and morally sentimental and utopian hopes to establish anarchistic millennium by using revolutionary force to eliminate the need for force in a purely classless society (Niebuhr, 1948: 278), which the Western nations depended on but failed to achieve justice for all. In addition, the Christian faith, as practiced, had not solution to the problem of injustice because it was not translated and lived in concrete ways that the love of God would become experiential and effectual in confronting the forces of injustice.

The Christian faith ought to be such that help people to see that the love of God is lived to the extent that it would promote justice and peace within the society. The Christian faith was celebrated by the Western nations but injustice was also deeply entrenched in the manner they treated others unjustly. In this situation, Niebuhr (1948: 280) noted that

the first task of the Christian Church was to interpret the sorrows and distresses, agonies and pains through which the world was passing and recognize the hand of God in them, and to see beyond the crises because there was a divine judgment upon the sins that were travails of the nations.

But the Church could fulfil its concrete redemptive relation to the society only if it fulfilled the conditions of contrite faith. From this background, the WCC programme called for a return to Christianity that reflected the justice, peace, and love of God in the society instead of relying on secular idealism and its false promises (Niebuhr, 1948: 282). Reliance

on secular idealism, secular law, and uncritical Christian legalism would not promote social justice; therefore, the Christian Church ought to strive more earnestly for the peace of the nations by translating the gospel to speak to the conditions of oppressors and the oppressed. The WCC realized that unless divine grace flowed into the hearts of women and men, they would not only fail to obey the law, but will also use it as an instrument for their own advantage (Niebuhr, 1948: 282-283).

The Responsible Society: World's Perspective

The theme of this programme dominated the ecumenical social thought throughout the 1950s. The second Assembly of WCC at Evanston, 1954, affirmed that the Christian Social responsibility was centered on the mighty acts of the creator who created the world were embraced within his eternal purpose centered on justice and peace (WCC, 1954: 282).

In view of the above, the first assembly of the WCC at Amsterdam coined the term 'Responsible Society'. By 'responsible society', it meant a society "where freedom was the freedom of men [and women] who acknowledge responsibility to justice and public order and where those who hold political authority and economic power are responsible for its exercise to, and the people whose welfare is affected by it" (1954: 283). Responsible society was not an alternative social or political system, but a criterion by which we judge all existing social orders and at the same time a standard to guide us in the specific choices we have to make (WCC, 1954: 283). Justice cannot exist where few people abuse social and political power by denying the majority their socio-economic and political freedom. The WCC sees the Churches as vanguards of God's justice and peace until these are fully realized by all human beings without conditions.

This report encouraged the exercise of justice at all levels of society: families, work places, young peoples' teams, tribal groups and associations, and Christian congregations (1954: 284). Concerning the function and structure of the state, the Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State, in 1937 gave the following functions of the state with regard to justice: 1) Since God is the source of justice, the state is not the ultimate

source of justice, but rather, its guarantor. It is the servant of justice; God is the ultimate source of justice, 2) True justice is dynamic and its forms must vary to meet changing needs. Those who seek it should be made sensitive by love to discover such needs where they have been neglected, 3) Justice requires the development of political institutions which are humane as they touch the lives of people, against wrong use of power, 4) No one form of government has a universal claim on Christians, but any political system must include some elements without which it tends to become oppressive tyranny, 5) By this, Christians should work by active participation in political affairs, 6)

Christians should work for the embodiment of the responsible society in political institutions by emphasizing justice for all (WCC, 1954: 285). Concerning problems that have bedeviled the Economic Life and social policies, thereby fostering life-denying injustice in the world, the report affirmed that the Church is concerned about God's concern for human beings who work to produce goods and services, who use them, and for whom businesses exist. Churches are to stand wherever justice is lacking. The Church is not under obligation to uncritically support any particular country, but should be critical of every economic exploitation and marginalization. Other areas where Christian concerns for social justice make the Churches uneasy about the status quo include: Warnings in the Bible about the dangers to the rich man, which Churches ought to use in challenging practices of injustice, biblical call for efficient production as well as fair distribution of resources, the need for identifying with the weak in the society, the need to call on trade unions to be objective and responsible to the needs of society, and the need to remind those in political power to make policies that are life-giving for all citizens in the society (WCC, 1954: 287).

Development of Justice in Ecumenical Discussion

The first major World Conferences of the Ecumenical Movement were entirely under the influence of the majority Churches (Western Missionary Churches) (Duchrow, 2002: 629). They focused on the conflict of understanding the concept of the kingdom of God in relation to history. The first World Missionary Conference at Edinburg (1910) had

understood 'kingdom of God' as "Christianizing of the world (educating people into the ways of Western Civilization).

In Stockholm Conference of "Life and Work" (1925), the German and English positions on the kingdom of God clashed: To the German Bishop (Ludwig), on the one hand, the kingdom of God was supra-mundane, having to do with human hearts and that it penetrated the community only when it was a Christian community; and not completely because of sin. On the other hand, the English Bishop (F.T Woods) spoke of "setting the kingdom of God on earth" (Duchrow, 2002: 629). However, Stockholm (1925) defined the aim of the conference as "united in practical action in Christian Life and Work" (Duchrow, 2002: 629). All this while, the conference was making effort towards how the kingdom of God could address real issues of social justice in the real world in dire need of justice.

The second World Missionary Conference (1928) in Jerusalem gave more practical shape to the understanding of kingdom of God. This time the conference rejected in principle the worship of money, calling it 'the religion of capitalistic society' (Duchrow, 2002: 629). At this time, it was made clear that the object of mission was not merely to shape the life of individual Christians and Christian communities but also social and political life of society as Jesus intended and did. Following the above tentative attempts to mobilize the biblical perspective of the kingdom of God against modern secularism and structures of exploitation in the economic systems and colonialism, the 1937 Oxford Life and Work Conference on "Church, Community and State", reverted to the Medieval Reformation majority Church Model of "Taming Power" by participating in it, which laid the foundation for ecumenical social ethics until 1966 to 1968 (Duchrow, 2002: 629-630).

The great world economic crisis and the rise of fascist totalitarian states constituted the background to this "Christian realism" behind which stood theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr, J.H Oldham, and Emil Brunner. Between the line taken by kingdom of God theology (Transformation of the worldly orders and resistance on the basis of an alternative Christian Society) and resigned accommodation

to the worldly orders in privatized piety, the majority at Oxford supported critical but constructive approach which was intended to contribute to relative justice on the basis of natural law or moral law (Duchrow, 2002: 629-630).

The World Conference on Church and Society in Geneva (1966) and Uppsala (1968) represent the beginning of a new period in search of justice in the life of the ecumenical movement informed by increased participation from the Churches of Africa and Latin America; shifting from its orientation from the top (seeking to influence power holders) to a perspective more from below (participating in the actual struggles of the oppressed in their imitation of the Suffering Messiah). Methods also changed to models of contextual participation and reflection towards struggles which expressed the transcendence of the kingdom of God (Dachrow, 2002: 630).

Programme to Combat Racism

Racism has been one of the heinous weapons militating against social justice and peace within the human family. Hugh McCullum (2004: 346) argues that "the Ecumenical Movement has accepted that human beings are made for community, which is a human characteristic". In this programme, the Churches were blamed for joining forces of oppression when they should have been forces of liberation; Member-Churches were, therefore, encouraged to emphasize the liberating elements of their faith (Mudge, 2004: 346). The WCC's 1969 Central Committee at Canterbury, UK, took steps to establish the programme to combat racism (PCR) (Mudge, 2004: 286). This was planned to become ecumenism's most controversial foray into material solidarity with the oppressed. The emphasis fell on white racism and racist character of the white wealth and power. This programme focused on checking racism in government and private sectors, and how the Church contributes to it. Churches were called to support organizations representing the racially oppressed and those supporting victims of racism in order to promote justice and peace (Mudge, 2004: 286-287). Other programmes emerging from this committee included "the future of man [and woman] and the society in a world of science-Based Technology",

and "violence and non-violence and the struggle for social justice" (Mudge, 2004: 287). All of these programmes focused on search for justice and humane treatment of one another in the world.

Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation

This programme was developed to engage ecumenical member-churches in a conciliar process of mutual commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation as a priority for world council programmes. It was originally intended for the WCC but its Vancouver assembly (1983) later extended it to non-member churches. Vancouver was responding to a situation of crisis outlined in the assembly statement on peace and justice: "Humanity is now living in the dark shadows of an arms race more intense and of systems of injustice more widespread than the world ever known (Duchrow, 2002: 631). The programme outlined the responsibility of the Churches in this situation to include: confessing faith anew and repenting for their past silence, biblical vision was regarded as not being one of the many options for Christians but an imperative for the times. Christians were to resist the powers of death in racism, sexism, caste oppression, economic exploitation, militarism, violation of human rights, and misuse of science and technology (Duchrow, 2002: 632).

The Vancouver assembly touched off a worldwide JPIC process because many national, regional, and confessional ecumenical initiatives contributed to the richness of JPIC and the preparations for the World Convocation. The World Convocation that took place in Seoul Korea (1990) saw an important road towards common pronouncements and actions on the urgent questions of human survival. The convocation put forward some affirmations and recommendations for the Churches: regarding the exercise of power as accountable to God, God's option for the poor, equal value of all races and peoples, male and female created in the image of God, truth is at the foundation of a community of free people, modeling the peace of Jesus, creation as beloved of God, the earth as the Lord's, the dignity and commitment of younger generation, and human rights as given by God (Duchrow, 2002: 632).

The WCC Seoul Convocation (1990) on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) was intended to help build stronger conciliar fellowship in the ecumenical committee around the shared moral principles (Mudge, 2004: 301). However, in the preparatory process, some Member-Churches saw "conciliar process" as implying ecclesiological commitment which they were unprepared to make. The Roman Catholic Church withdrew its agreement and sponsorship in the convocation. This shows that not all was smooth in the WCC in search of justice and peace because there were divided opinions of certain matters.

Legacy of Ecumenical Social Thought

Mudge (2004: 279) notes that ecumenical social thought needs to be construed in two ways: institutionally and theologically. Institutionally, ecumenical social thought refers to thinking about social implications of the Christian faith carried on by the various administrative and official gatherings of ecumenical bodies. Theologically, ecumenical social thought wrestles with challenges of achieving the Oikoumene (whole inhabited earth, world) as a global household of life for all human beings living under the reign of the creator (Mudge, 2004: 279). This new understanding called for a central motif: a discovery of the Church's relationship to God's creative and redemptive work throughout creation, a rediscovery occasioned by deeper encounter with secular liberation struggles and with people of other faiths (Kinnamon cited in Mudge, 2004: 280).

Understanding the ecumenical social thought of 1968 depended on making reference to the seminal contributions of the 1966 Geneva 'Church and Society'. The 1966 gathering marked an effort to understand the revolutionary realities which shaped the modern world economically, politically, technologically and scientifically (Mudge, 2004: 281). Grappling with these issues raised theological and social questions which dominated the years since 1968. Paul Albrecht (cited in Mudge, 2004: 281) argues that "Geneva 1966 questioned the nature of Christian responsibility for world economic and social development. How do Churches understand revolutionary social transformation? How do Churches with

different moral traditions and contemporary attitudes cooperate in facing such questions? What mode of cooperation existed between the Roman Catholic Church and the Ecumenical Movement? Therefore, Geneva Conference criticized the concept of "Responsible Society". With the differences of ideologies confronting the process and development of the ecumenical social thought, the possibility of substantial Christian Social Witness was weakened on the global scale (Mudge, 2004: 281). However, the process continued even in situations where opposing points seemed to make real encounter impossible. This is where the WCC and the Ecumenical bodies deserve commendations.

Uppsala Assembly

As an heir to the legacy, the WCC Uppsala assembly met at a time of tumultuous events because the events of the time set the agenda of the assembly (Mudge, 2004:282). Preparations for this assembly took place at the height of social optimism symbolized by civil-rights movement and the "Prague Springtime". Despite all the ambiguities of the time, things were still possible with even an application for the WCC membership from the Roman Catholic Church (Mudge, 2004: 282). Social issues raised at the assembly included The Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church, which reaffirmed the determination of the Church not to compromise in the face of the prevailing situations, and secondly, World Economic and Development, where the fair and common use of the resources of creation was emphasized (Mudge, 2004: 283). The Church was encouraged to be bold in speaking of itself as the sign of the coming unity of humankind. Uppsala marked the surfacing of a new perspective where the WCC began to make commitments to various actions intended to be in solidarity with the victims of oppression by promoting justice for all.

Towards a Church for the poor

At Nairobi (1975), recapitulation and new emphases were made especially on the Uppsala concerning issues of faith, science and technology, militarism and disarmament, ecology and human survival, and the role of women in the Church and society (Mudge, 2004: 290). Nairobi assembly marked a growing liberation perspective on many aspects of WCC

social thought and actions. Philip Potter, who was one-time WCC General Secretary emerged as key voice in the transition from older to newer paradigms of ecumenical social thought (Mudge, 2004:290). This time also saw the development of moving away from the Western paradigms towards participatory postures that listened to other voices.

Programmes that were focused on and consolidated here were "Towards a Church of the poor", towards a "Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society' (JPSS), and towards a coming on "Faith, Science and the Future" (Mudge, 2004: 290). Towards a Church of the poor was undertaken to produce documents to explore the relationships between the poor and the organized Church in the medieval periods. The idea of towards the Church of the poor was for the Church to identify with the poor, encourage preferential option for the poor, and identification and solidarity with the poor as means of promoting justice in the oppressive world (Mudge, 2004: 291).

Militarism, Disarmament and Peace

Nairobi, like all other WCC assemblies, did recognize the concern about global militarism, noting connection between perceived and real economic injustice and the resort to warfare. The programme met with opposing ideas between the Just-War theorists and the Pacifists, making it difficult and contentious (Mudge, 2004: 294). A committee was set up to deliberate the contention, which led to the production of a document: "Before it is too late: The challenge of Nuclear Disarmament". The final outcome was that the production, development, and use of nuclear weapons were a crime against humanity and must be condemned on ethical and theological grounds (Mudge, 2004: 295). One could also see more complications that keep posing challenges to the WCC's noble task of searching for peace in our world today when it comes to the relationship between justice and peace. For instance, are there no instances when the use of weapons could help in fighting evil to give way to peace? Could WCC's desire and good strategies stop the influx of evil in the world? But on the other hand, if weapons are used as a means to restoring peace in the world, would that be "just-peace"?

Community of men and women

Since 1948, the position of women in the Church has been a concern to the ecumenical social concern. A department on the cooperation between men and women in the Church was established in 1954 and 1974 sponsored by the WCC's desk (Mudge, 2004: 296). Feminist theologians critiqued patriarchy and expressed anger at gender injustice against women. Therefore, in 1988, the WCC launched an ecumenical decade of Solidarity with Women, and concluded with a presentation at the eight assembly in Harare in 1998 (Mudge, 2004: 296).

The sixth assembly (1983) saw only one theme dominating: "The Confession of Jesus as the life of the world and Christian resistance to the powers of death are one and the same thing" (Mudge, 2004: 296). The seventh assembly in Canberra (1991) saw the replacement of East-West replaced by North-South perspective. This assembly also marked as a season of great debate in ecumenical social ethics, especially over the paradigms used. What was called 'South' began to stake-out its own perspectives and positions in a manner determined to be "non-aligned" politically, economically and theologically (Mudge, 2004: 304). This combined with the need to appropriate the learning of Seoul, led to 1992 a reorganization of WCC's Unit iii under the name "Justice, Peace and Creation".

The destructiveness of modern warfare and inequalities of modern economic life had led to a new kind of theological reflection on traditional "Life and Work" issues. WCC's Geneva Conference marked a new start, a reorientation of the "Life and Work" tradition; so the WCC and the Catholic Church jointly set up a committee on "Society, Development and Peace" (SODEPAX), to give advice on matters of social justice (Lodberg, 2004:323).

Telling the Truth about Ourselves and Our World: Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV)

The article, Telling the Truth about Ourselves and Our World: Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV), shows how the WCC has declared a decade to overcome violence (Chunakara, 2013: ix) during the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation (IEPC) held

in Kingston Jamaica in 2011. This was a remarkable and historic ecumenical event and the biggest since the ninth World Council of Churches (WCC) Assembly in 2006. It was inspired by the experiences of the churches around the world and their commitment to justice and peace. More than one thousand participants at the IEPC were nourished and enriched by a renewed theological, moral and spiritual incitement to unite in the call to build a culture of justice and peace in the world. Nurturing peace involves developing and nurturing positive attitudes toward fullness of life, inspired by the ethos of justice. The IEPC made every effort to lift up the spirit of justice and peace (Chunakara, 2013: vii).

This WCC programme was launched in 2001 in Berlin, Germany; in the hope that: "[Churches] come together from the four corners of the earth, aware of the urgent need to overcome violence that has pervaded [human lives], the world and the whole created order. The programme was launched in response to peoples' deep yearning for the restoration of justice and building lasting peace grounded in justice (Telling the truth, 2009: 8). The WCC set up this programme calling on individual Churches and movements to work together in promoting justice and building peace in the world. Churches have called one another to an International Day of Prayer for peace and justice on 21st September of every year, visiting different countries to listen, learn, and share approaches and challenges in overcoming violence and in peace-making in the world.

Gender Justice and Gender Equality

Equality means equal rights, obligations, and opportunities for women and men in all important areas of life. That is, women and men should have the same power to shape society and their own lives (2012: 6). The Church of Sweden advocates for gender justice where men and women have the same rights and the same value. Equality means that women and men have the same opportunities, rights perspectives. Justice remains elusive once gender injustice reigns between women and men (2012: 6). "To the Church, it is about asserting and defending every individuals' unalienable value and rights, as God's loved children, as images of God ... the Church maintains that a Church of equality and

inclusiveness is the only Church that can be a community open to all, relevant to its times and offering scope for many voices and perspectives to play a part in interpreting faith tradition" (2012: 6-7).

Lessons from fifty years of Ecumenical Work for Economic and Social Justice

According to Paul Albrecht (nd), "From Oxford to Vancouver", this document focused on economic and social justice which the ecumenical movement has been critical of (Albrecht, nd: 148). The document further reveals that the ecumenical social concern could be classified into the following periods: 1) The ecumenical social justice and peace (Pre-WCC period, 1925-1938), 2) First WCC formulation of political and economic policies (1948-1961), 3) A time of review (1962-1968), and 4) The period of liberation ecumenism (1969-1987) (Albrecht, nd: 148). These series of activities attest that WCC has never relaxed from search for peace and justice right from inception.

Ecumenical Chronicle Life, Justice, and Peace for All: A Call to action

This programme was mainly based on economic justice. It is a call to action necessitated by people and the earth being in peril due to overconsumption of some, growing inequalities as shown in the persistent poverty of many in contrast to the extravagant wealth of a few (2012:590). The WCC makes a case that the global community life would end if the sins of the egotism, callous disregard for, and greed, which lie at the root of these crises are not addressed (2012: 590). With a sense of urgency this dialogue is brought to the Churches as a call for action; born of a profound hope and belief that "an economy of life is not only possible, it is in the making, and God's justice lies at its very foundation" (2012: 590). This dialogue addresses the destructive economic variance between the global North and the global South because it fosters economic injustice.

Conclusion

Justice and peace have occupied pride of place within the ministry of the wee right from inception. Issues of justice have centred on economic, political, gender, and environmental justice. Although the wee has had its share of internal and external threats and challenges, it

has never given up on the search for justice and peace in the world. wee has produced series of holistic programmes at various periods of its existence to promote social justice within the society; but search for just peace remains a war to live with because of the ever-emerging issues that constitute threats to human unity and wellbeing as the world becomes more and more a global village. The entire ecumenical movement and the wee deserve commendation because of their resilience and commitment to the search for justice and peace in a world that seems to lose taste and respect for community and life-giving relationship. It must be pointed out that the Week's programmes for the promotion of just peace are and have been an up-hill task because the parameters and scope of this tasks look like an impossible task. For instance, its decade to overcome violence was the decade when violence started claiming thousands of lives across the globe.

The global socio-economic and political threats are also there, but wee has been resolute and firmed in its mission, which is commendable. To facilitate this search for global justice and peace, the wee member-churches may need to transcend their individual traditions and ideologies that tend to frustrate common effort towards facilitating just peace. It is, therefore, highly recommended that ecumenical movement and the wee should keep their resilience on building, promoting and sustaining justice and peace in the world in keeping with the creator's mandate to humanity for a peaceful society to thrive.

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