

The Road to Nonviolence

Moving peace work to the center of Christian life

[Hansuli John Gerber](#) | OCTOBER 18, 2010

Two special designations were proclaimed for this millennium's first decade, which comes to an end this year: the Decade to Overcome Violence, sponsored by the World Council of Churches; and the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World, sponsored by the United Nations. The core objective of the World Council of Churches' decade was to move the concern for peace from the periphery of the churches to their very center. And while that goal has not been reached, some progress has been made. What is important at this point is to determine how the urgent tasks of preventing and overcoming violence and of building a just peace may be continued, even if they are still somewhat marginal to the churches whose *raison d'être* is the ministry of reconciliation.

In spite of the fact that neither the United Nations nor the World Council of Churches was really equipped or determined to carry out their full-blown, decade-long campaigns, their attempts have left indications that the movement is going in the right direction. The discourse on peace and violence, for example, has undergone lasting change. The debate about just war has given over some space to the debate on just peace. Serious work on the meaning and implementation of just peace has begun and cannot be escaped. Some taboos have been broken and new issues have come up, like suicide, genital mutilation and domestic violence. Violence, in its many types and forms, is more fully understood and more clearly analyzed. The positions of the churches and of religions in regard to violence and peace are more clearly explained, their potential for peacemaking more challenged. Churches see themselves obliged to come out of their isolation on issues related to war, peace and justice.

Making a Path for Peace

Since the year 2000, the context itself, which includes violence, war and peace, has also changed. Violence as a subject has found its way into the daily headlines; terrorism has gone global; and violence has been diffused. War is beyond the control of single states or the international community. It is decentralized and outsourced to private actors. Today the idea of a just war seems more fiction than reality.

One of the most remarkable and sustainable impulses of the past decade has come from the World Health Organization. Who in church circles would have expected that an evidence-based public health approach to the prevention of violence could reduce violence significantly in many places, across many cultures? The organization's approach maps violence in its context and documents the direct impact of prevention measures. This has led to surprising results—for example, a reduction of violence through coaching parents about parenting even before their children are born.

It takes time for the churches to catch on to such good news. Meanwhile, peace building and conflict transformation have become academic and practical disciplines around the world. Domestic violence is also better documented and addressed in interdisciplinary ways. These developments are quite recent and must be continued, broadened and deepened in the next decade. No single party or branch of society can do that by itself, nor can any significant part of civil society exempt itself from such a responsibility, least of all the churches.

Today's context for violence prevention and promotion of peace is at once difficult and encouraging. Elements like the following give reason for concern. The peace movement, insofar as it exists, is very dispersed and lacks or refuses coordination. The institutional churches, primarily in Europe and North America, have lost much of their historic leverage and are preoccupied with internal issues and a struggle for survival. Political leaders lack efficiency and credibility while being increasingly subject to celebrity media. The world economy suffers from uncertainty and is built to a high degree on a historic injustice: that industrialization tends to widen the wealth gap. Democracy as we know it is increasingly questioned as a value and is undergoing profound changes that feel threatening to many. Direct democracy, for example, is threatened by populist politics and by globalization.

At the same time, several encouraging developments can be observed. Civil society no longer accepts violence as an unavoidable given. Violence prevention, peace education and peace building have become international, interdisciplinary programs. Interreligious interest, encounter and action are becoming mainstream. Direct access to information and interaction is possible for large parts of society anywhere. While abolition of nuclear weapons may still be far away, it is being sought with increased energy. More encouraging signs could be listed.

The context seems ripe as never before for the implementation of ideas as old as humanity—peace and justice.

Are the Churches Changing?

In 2006 the Assembly of the World Council of Churches asked for a consultative process toward an ecumenical declaration on just peace and an international ecumenical peace convocation, known as I.E.P.C. The consultative process began in 2008 and the convocation will take place in 2011. The Decade to Overcome Violence, deliberately launched with an emphasis on joint ecumenical efforts and processes among church hierarchies and also at the grass-roots level, tried to challenge the churches to “relinquish any theological justification of violence.” If the D.O.V. has not brought churches to that point, it has at least helped to determine what it implies, which turns out to be nothing short of a paradigm shift. Historically, churches have resisted change, especially when that change involved questioning common practices handed down over time. From that perspective, the current consultative process, limited as it may be, is a test.

Will Dietrich Bonhoeffer's 1934 appeal for a clear stance on peace and against war finally be heard? Will the peace theology that has existed over centuries but was often excluded from serious debate or relegated to a small cadre of idealists come to enjoy greater support? There is no shortage of appeals to peace, calls to stop violence and reprimands against injustice or acts of terrorism from leaders of various church traditions. But in Christian tradition the justification of war, now more neutrally called “military intervention,” has been a majority position. Is that about to change? Given the state of the world in 2010, one would certainly hope so.

What further evidence is needed to document that armed intervention is neither stopping violence nor preventing injustice, much less creating a just peace? Only in the 20th century has war been justified by the claim that it is necessary for bringing peace. Historically, war was used to build, expand or secure nationhood, and churches did not usually object to such wars. The just war teaching was intended to make sure war was declared and carried out in self-defense, preserving the safety of citizens. (That is a far cry from any war our generations have seen.) Will the churches now find it possible or, even better, necessary to no longer justify war that pretends to make peace?

Today, the amount of money spent on the military in wartime and in peacetime is a gross violation of human rights, sustainability, justice and peace. Why, for instance, is military spending not linked to the U.N. Millennium Development Goals? Why don't the churches speak up in that regard? To be antimilitary was an early Christian virtue, at least until Constantine. For a long time now that position has been considered politically incorrect or economically impossible at best and antipatriotic at worst. The issue of human security

is genuine, but there is ample proof that militarism increases insecurity, not security, for the earth and its people.

It is true that for most of its history, more precisely since the fourth century, Christianity has not been strictly pacifist. But is that reason enough to maintain that violence is compatible with the way of Jesus? In many people's view, God condones violence. Love and violence are not seen as mutually exclusive. As the Decade to Overcome Violence reaches its end and violence remains a major threat to human life and to the earth, what is at stake is that image or understanding of God and with it the fate of humanity.

Justice, Essential for Peace

Violence on the macro level, capable of killing humanity and making the world uninhabitable, is very real. Not unrelated is violence on the micro level: domestic violence and street violence, which many lament as a sign of uncivilized behavior that should be kept in check through repression. Both recent research and experience show that microviolence is preventable. Whereas nuclear weapons can and must be abolished, violent behavior on the street or at home cannot be abolished in the same way, but it can be significantly reduced. Major steps in prevention are education, training, coaching, practical measures, coherent legal frameworks and the building of trust and respect. Those measures are in opposition to popular electoral promises to "get tough," which generally give priority to repression, apprehension and exclusion. Churches do much compassionate, constructive work in the area of interpersonal violence. The Decade to Overcome Violence is a witness to such work. Full violence-prevention, however, has to overcome not only the violence of individuals, but the structural violence of an unjust world order and the double standards that condemn violence by others while accepting violence on one's own behalf. Peace and justice are related not simply because there is no peace without justice. There is essential injustice in the way violence is being judged by political, economic or religious authorities.

All of this points to a necessary paradigm shift within the Christian churches, which the Decade to Overcome Violence has not accomplished but has helped to promote, making the imperative for nonviolence more evident.

Let me suggest five priorities for churches, movements and people who are committed to peace work beyond this decade.

- 1) Seek cooperation: commit to coordination in preference to self-protection and use synergies.
- 2) Promote civil rights and civic action: act in favor of kindness and justice, intervene against violence, be prepared to engage in self-giving acts for justice.
- 3) Resist confusion: Reduce fear, accept the fact that conflict is inevitable and refuse violence of any kind. 4) Practice violence-prevention by taking a public health perspective, which is recommended by the World Health Organization. This means understanding violence not exclusively in criminal or political terms, but as a phenomenon within the agenda of public health. This approach should be used as part of an interdisciplinary approach.
- 4) Go by the evidence instead of relying on assumptions.
- 5) Learn and teach nonviolence as a way of life; reflect it in attitude, speech and action.

Peace work has a future. That future is in diversification. Peace work must be practical, competent, networked and holistic. It includes spirituality, by which I mean faith, hope and love. There is little doubt that peace work will be controversial and will sometimes meet with violent response. That has been true since the time of the

biblical prophets. Yet a violent response will not keep the peacemakers from moving ahead, toward a future lived in a just peace. Peace work is a gift and a responsibility. Everything else is temporary and misleading.

Peace Online

Decade to Overcome Violence: www.overcomingviolence.org

Nuclear weapons: www.globalzero.org and www.globalpriorities.org

Practical active nonviolence: www.aforcemorepowerful.org

U.N. Peace Education: www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/peace/index.asp

U.S. military spending and costs of war: www.nationalpriorities.org

World Health Organization: www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/en

For a select bibliography on conflict transformation and peace:

www.peacemakers.ca/bibliography/bib40christian.html

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