

# Mission as Reconciliation in Pluralistic Contexts

## *The Praxis of Reconciliation*

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(Not for publication)

### **Introduction**

In the accounts of the actual practice of peace making and reconciliation I have learnt much of the process and the conditions for such a *praxis*. More than this these stories are very heartening and gives real hope that in the hardest and most severe situations of violent hostilities God's work of reconciliation can take place. Certainly what we have heard is not mere theoretical conceptualization but the actual stories of people involved in the hard work of bringing some measure of healing, understanding and peaceful living together amongst communities that have been in violent conflict with each other.

My remarks are confined to the context of my own country, Malaysia as I do not have the experience or knowledge to comment on other countries in the region. The church's practice of the ministry of reconciliation can be seen to involve two types of situation. One is where Christians reach out to the other seeking to build peace and understanding. The other is where the church acts as the agent of reconciliation between two hostile parties. My comments will primarily address the first situation.

### **Why we need to consider this paradigm.**

This is a timely subject / praxis to be taken up by the church in Malaysia. We must be thankful to God that we have not experienced the kind of long-running hostilities with historical roots that periodically break out into violent clashes between ethnic, tribal or religious communities. The government so far has closely monitored and not allowed militant groups of any variety that advocate violence to proliferate, recruit or spread their views publicly.

Nevertheless, we have seen at least two violent episodes in our history, on a scale and intensity that reminds us that deep resentments are not far below the surface of our society. The first, in 1969, was racial riots between predominantly Malays and Chinese which lasted for several days and required a state of emergency to be declared. The second, as recent as 2001, was fighting between Indians and Malays, which was localized and was quickly brought under control. Yet, despite the rarity of actual fighting breaking out, we know that in particular cases and specific situations, emotion can be easily fanned into action, and deep resentments are simmering just below the surface of the various communities. Tensions are palpable in some instances.

Furthermore, recent developments in inter-religious relations, in particular between Islam and other religions, add to the urgency of an initiative in bridge building, engaging in dialogue to foster greater understanding and laying the ground for cooperation towards common social goals and policies for a multi-cultural and multi-religious society.

Recent issues over the religious rights of non-Muslims in relation to conversions into and out of Islam, and the ban on the use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims have pushed these communities to take a sharply adversarial position. The Islamic views are being challenged in the courts.

This is part of the larger background of a greater vigilance against the encroachment of Islam into society, and the subtle and not so subtle actions in eroding the rights of non-Muslims and undermining the faith of other religions. Non-Muslims are no longer willing to be treated as inferior (*dhimmi*), second class and being patronized by the Islamic authorities. The suspicions of a strategy of Islamisation are not without good grounds and evidence, it must be said.

I remember at one ecumenical conference some years ago, a youth leader shared very positively about his experience in an inter-faith camp organized by a Muslim group, and urged a more positive understanding of Islam and Muslims. Immediately after, one of the top church leaders chided the remark as being too naïve and urged vigilance against such attempts to paint a rosy and innocuous picture of Islam. There is much truth in that no doubt. I recount this only to highlight the level of suspicion and wariness that is in the background to any dealings with Islamic bodies and authorities.

But precisely because we have come to this point we need to engage in a ministry of bridge building and dialogue. At the moment the stances are adversarial and taking positions where there can only be one winner. Muslim religious leaders are aware that this is a challenge to their position as the dominant religion in the land, that their very religion is being challenged. It would appear that this can only lead to hardened positions on both sides and deep suspicions will continue to grow in both communities.

### **The Character of the Ministry**

Such a ministry of peace building in our context would not be exactly along the lines which led to the development of reconciliation as a new paradigm of mission. That is, ours is not like those societies which have experienced protracted violent conflicts or in need to end such hostilities, where the healing of the victims of these conflicts and the reconstruction of a broken society are the crucial needs. What we need would be more like a “salting” ministry to arrest deterioration in relationship and a potentially dangerous direction towards conflict. It would be more preventive in nature, seeking an alternative way to overcome the tensions already existing in society.

As far as I know, and I stand corrected in this, there is no group of Christians who are involved in sustained efforts in dialog with other faiths, in particular Islam, with the specific goal of peace building. We do not have a strong Anabaptist tradition in Malaysia with its emphasis on a pacifist position of non-violence. While there have been calls for dialogs on an equal footing to discuss religious issues, these have been initiated by those in positions of power, the religious authorities who rightly have the duty to protect the rights of their adherents. There are important issues of rights and power at stake. And the Islamic authorities have rejected such dialogs on equal terms because it is seen as diminishing their position in society.

If we are to embark on such a ministry of reconciliation, what would such an initiative look like? Here, I draw out some of the characteristics of such a movement from the stories that were given to us by the writer.

1. Firstly, such a group is not associated with centers of power, either political or religious. The goal of peace making is the only goal that motivates its initiatives and projects, and it is transparently without any hidden agendas.
2. It means the group itself comes with the “weakness” of being without any means of persuasion, either with threats or rewards, except the persuasion of wanting to build a bridge of understanding and relationship.

3. It is clearly motivated by the gospel of Jesus Christ for peace, justice and righteousness. The effort demands perseverance with the groups with whom dialog is pursued to allay the suspicions of these groups. But I think, in our situation, it will also require a willingness to face the misunderstanding of the churches/Christians, indeed their criticisms for reaching out to “enemies.” Perhaps here Dr Shenk can relate any experiences in this regard.
4. It will need an organized group of like-minded persons who are totally agreed on the theological basis of the ministry and the goals to be achieved. This will need much work starting from scratch since, as mentioned earlier, there is no strong theological tradition of peace making, certainly no denominational organization to provide the resources needing for such a task.
5. It can begin with groups which are open to similar goals of dialog and bridge building, moderate groups that can then reach out to others in their own communities.
6. And finally, such a group needs to be willing to accept the injustices and wrongs done, or to defer the demands for justice and not require restitution as the pre-condition or goal of the dialog. In other words, the first step would be to provide the space and security for truth-telling and to hear each other’s side and experience. As Schreiter describes the process of reconciliation, this is an essential first step before true reconciliation can take place.

This is not to say there is no place for the important voice of advocacy for the rights of the non-Muslim communities. Or the prophetic calls for justice, and demands for a more open society of equal participation of all communities, instead of the dominance of the majority group. The initiative of peace building is complementary to these efforts, and together are the salting of our society not only to prevent deterioration but the transformation of our nation.

### Bibliography

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