

Baptists as Peacemakers

David Coffey OBE



*David Coffey in Vietnam, May 2006
BWA Human Rights Delegation*

*Address given by David Coffey at a seminar organised by the
Baptist Peace Fellowship
during the Baptist Assembly held in Plymouth 2010*

Baptists as Peacemakers

Norman Kember suggested the title of my address and I have discovered what a Pacific Ocean of a subject we have this afternoon. If any one is looking for a topic for a doctoral thesis, I have done some ground research and will be happy to share the fruits of my findings!

I honour the work of the Baptist Peace Fellowship and especially the distinguished contribution brought by Norman Kember. I applaud the emphasis that the staff of the Faith and Unity Department of BUGB brings to issues of Peace and Justice and commend the latest DVD that features issues of peacemaking. Graham Sparkes' article in the *Baptist Times* 12 March 2010 illustrates how national and international issues have implications for the local church. Barrow in Furness BC is a church fellowship at the heart of the political debate on the replacement of Trident. I commend the 'now is the time' campaign for now is the time for local churches to be aware of the Christian commitment to peacemaking.

One of the privileges of working with the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) for the past 20 years is the global perspective I have gained on issues of peace and justice, human rights and religious liberty. I am delighted that the BWA has just appointed the first Director for the newly created Freedom and Justice Department. Raimundo Berreto is a gifted Brazilian pastor who will direct the peace and justice advocacy of the BWA and this will include issues of peace and justice. Graham Sparkes of BUGB has been invited to take a major lead in the new Peace Commission.

In all parts of the world there is a constant need for Baptists to be involved in peacemaking. Tony Peck, as General Secretary of the European Baptist Federation (EBF), could speak of the sensitive conciliation process that took place between Russian and Georgian Baptists following the brief armed conflict between their two nations in 2009. Tensions in the region are still high but the rapid response by the EBF and the mediating influence of the Baptist Union of Ukraine brought fragile peace and reconciliation to the Baptists in this region before it escalated into something far more serious.

The way I have chosen to shape this address is to take some practices of the *just peacemaking* movement - and then illustrate this with major initiatives by Baptist participants. The *just peacemaking* movement has sought to develop a new biblical theology for peacemaking based on the Sermon on the Mount. You can learn more about the practices of *just peacemaking* on the web site www.matthew5project.org

I. Peace making as a persevering long term commitment – Wati Aier and the marathon peace process of Nagaland

This first principle is the painstaking process of taking active steps over a long period of time in order to bring peace between parties where there are the deepest divisions. I want to share with you the story of Naga people and the role of Baptists in bringing peace to this region of NE India¹.

¹ I am indebted to Dr John Sundquist for supplying me with the history of Baptists in Naga and the details of the Naga peace process.

Naga is located in North East India. Historically the Nagas have been a free and independent, democratically organized people comprising twenty main tribes and thirty or more sub-tribes. There are 600,000 Baptists in Naga that represents 90% of the population of ethnic Nagas.

The Nagas have never been conquered by India and never agreed to become part of India. Without their consent the Nagas were 'given' by the British to India at the end of Great Britain's colonial rule of India in 1947.

In 1872 an American Baptist Missionary, E.W. Clark, was assigned to Assam where he learned of the Naga people. He learned the Ao language & entered the Naga Hills from Assam and lived to witness the first Naga conversions to Christianity on Naga soil.

The Nagas' traditional religion was animist and their greatest taboo was to meet a person whose language they did not understand. They thought the way to appease the gods was to take the head of the person whom they could not understand and bring it back to their village and go through a cannibalistic ritual to appease the gods. With 30-70 different dialects, mutually unintelligible to each other, the Naga tribes lived in perpetual fear of the other.

When E.W Clark made his first visit to Naga it was to the Ao people, and he learned that language, translated the Gospel into Ao and wrote a grammar and dictionary for the Ao people. His first meeting with the Ao was remarkable and dangerous as young warriors greeted him by hurling a poisoned spear at him! Clark went over and picked up the spear and returned it to the warrior who had just tried to kill him. This confused the warriors and they retreated to the forest. The people listened to him and one family invited him to stay the night in their home. He stayed 3 weeks and it was this family that became the first Christian believers. In a very short period of time the vast majority of the Ao tribe became Christians.

Following Clark's example the Ao people learned the language of their neighbouring tribe and won them to Christ, who in turn did the same thing until by the mid 20th century 90% of all Naga people were followers of Jesus and called themselves Baptists. There were Nagas present at the 2005 BWA Congress Birmingham and I was privileged to visit the Naga churches of Dimipur and Kohima in December 2007.

When the British left India in 1947 they virtually gave the tribal people of the North East to India. In a free vote, 90% of India voted for independence but the will of the Naga people was ignored so, post-1947, a Naga Independence movement was born and several attempts were made to organize Nagas politically so they could declare their independence from India. In the 1950's India moved in troops to occupy Nagaland and at one time there was one Indian soldier for every eight Nagas. Villages were burned including homes, churches and schools, and 200,000 Nagas were killed by the Indian military.

In the 1960's the united effort for political vitality by the Nagas fractured into armed political factions which resulted in interference by India in Naga affairs with an inevitable increase of civil violence, and most alarming was the serious violence between the nationalist factions - many of them Baptist people.

In 1996 the Naga peoples celebrated 125 years since the coming of the Gospel in Kohima and over 130,000 Nagas attended the anniversary celebrations. The BWA President, Dr Nelson Fanini, and Dr John Sundquist, a Vice President of the BWA, were invited to be the main speakers. In the days immediately preceding the celebration, these two Baptist leaders were visited by the leaders of each of the factions and heard the pain and deep desire to be respected as a proud people seeking self determination and freedom from the oppressive yoke of India. John Sundquist abandoned the two sermons he had prepared and instead made a passionate appeal for a cessation of Naga on Naga violence.

John Sundquist became a trusted third party in the Naga peace process and he joined selected Asian Baptists who, along with a skilled Quaker team, have been privileged to be a pastoral presence in a series of off-the-record meetings with the leadership of the political factions over the past several years. Many of these meetings took place outside of India because the broadening circle of Naga leadership, both religious and civil society, lives not only in Nagaland but also in the neighbouring regions of Assam, Manipur, Burma and China.

The three years 2007-2010 have been remarkable in the process of peace making and the number of Naga groups participating is now over sixty. The key visionary behind this is Dr Wati Aier, Principal of The Oriental Theological Seminary based in Nagaland and a current Vice President of the BWA (2005-2010).

On 25 July 2007 a cease fire between the various Naga armed groups was declared and although there were periodic tragic outbreaks of violence this was a landmark moment. In February 2008 *The Forum for Naga Reconciliation* was formed consisting of 'apex organizations' and they invited a Baptist leader (Wati Aier) to act as the convenor of the forum. The forum also called upon the responsible leaders of the various factions to be vigilant toward any unwanted acts carried out on their behalf. Each tribal community elder, leader and citizen was requested to 'observe strict watch and to discipline the undisciplined be it underground or overground'.

The first *Prayer Summit* took place in May 2008 ending with a moving foot washing ceremony with 'enemies' taking the initiative and requesting 'the other' for permission to wash their feet and then covenanting together to go on working on this process of reconciliation.

A second *Prayer Summit* was convened in June 2008, which built on the deep yet fragile unity that was emerging. Forgiveness was asked for and given and there were significant times of prayer followed by some personal moments of reconciliation. A formal statement was issued expressing concern over the continuing violence among various Naga political groups and there was an appeal to political and civil leaders to make every effort to reduce tensions and to continue pursuing peace and reconciliation among all sections of Naga society.

The third *Prayer Summit* took place in August 2008 with all major national parties participating. Participants expressed their desire to be reconciled before God and their brother and sister Nagas. They committed themselves to build on the peace process

and affirmed the common hope expressed by those gathered at *The Forum of Naga Reconciliation* - 'to work out the details of turning swords into ploughshares within the earliest time frame.'

At the conclusion of this third prayer summit, the participants played a game of football between The United National team (comprised of all factions) versus the Naga Parliament team (Civil Societies). The Civil Societies won! I understand it was very impressive to see the players from the various national groups playing as one team.

I am confident that this painstakingly slow peace process is going to have a fruitful outcome and am aware of significant moves to convene a major Naga peace summit in September 2010². The Northern Ireland peace process that had input from key Baptists and representative Christians in and beyond the community also illustrates the painstaking work of peacemaking³.

2. Peace making by acknowledging responsibility - the Baptist truth and reconciliation process in South Africa ⁴

Like many Christian denominations in South Africa, Baptists were historically divided along racial, lingual and doctrinal grounds. The racial divide began in colonial times when Dutch, English and German settlers from Europe came to the southern tip of Africa in search of a better life, and met the African tribes that had previously migrated south. Racial attitudes and doctrinal issues played a major role in the broken bridges that resulted in a major split in the 1980's, when three of the four associations withdrew from the Baptist Union of Southern Africa and formed separate associations. Much suffering resulted because of the division, as disputes over property and pensions saw Baptists fighting and turning their backs on each other. The deepest divisions were between the mainly white Baptist Union (BU) and the mainly black Baptist Convention (BC).

Terry Rae, the former General Secretary of the BU, has shared with me many times the story of the key meeting that took place in May 1998 in the town of Colesburg, South Africa. One hundred and eighty people had gathered from the BU and BC, with ninety representatives from each group. On the first day of the gathering, they were in small discussion groups in a large hall and the task of each group was to write down on a flip chart the grievances and hurts that had been caused by actions, statements and attitudes of the other group. Some groups kept coming back for more paper. At the end of the first day, each group read out the list of items that represented the pain and hurt of the disunity.

² Since presenting this paper to the BPF in May 2010, a Naga peace accord was signed on 18 September 2010 pledging to end all violence and bloodshed in response to the 'deep yearning of the Naga people' for peace. In March 2011 Wati Aier was announced as the recipient of the BWA Human Rights Award for 2011.

³ Jonathan Powell *Great Hatred Little Room-making peace in Northern Ireland* (Bodley Head 2008)

⁴ I acknowledge the story telling source in this section is my good friend Terry Rae former General secretary of the Baptist Union of South Africa.

These papers were then displayed on the wall of the school hall. The long lists covered one wall from end to end and those present were invited to walk silently and prayerfully down this avenue of grief. Delegates from both groups, who were entering the process of reconciliation for the first time, wanted to leave the forum and go home because it was the first time some of them had expressed or heard the hurts of their division, and these experiences were still immensely painful.

The facilitator prevailed on everyone to remain and see the process through to the end and no one left. The next day, after a restless night, the devotional time was centred upon the cross of Jesus Christ. For a short while, the gathering looked away from their personal pain and focused upon the sufferings of Christ.

The two groups were seated on two sides of a hall. The neutral facilitator got up and said to the gathering, 'It is now over to you – who will begin the process of repentance and healing?'

Twenty minutes of tense silence followed.

Then one of the BC delegates rose to his feet and looked across at a BU delegate and confessed that he had criticised and spoken evil of his fellow Baptist. He asked for forgiveness. The two men met each other in the aisle and embraced. This started a floodgate of confession and repentance, with scores of people from both sides standing to confess and asking for forgiveness. There was much weeping; there were little prayer groups all over the hall; there were black and white delegates hugging each other and repenting for their behaviour and attitudes of the past. This went on for five hours without stopping.

Finally, exhausted, they took a brief break. During this time, the communion table was prepared. When they returned to the hall, the two groups sat at the Lord's Table together for the first time since 1987. It was an emotional and deeply spiritual event as the General Secretary of the BU served the bread to the delegates from the BC, and then the General Secretary of the BC served the bread to the BU delegates as together they remembered the death of Jesus Christ for us. The facilitator then asked them to take two communion cups and go to someone in the hall who had been the object of their pain and bitterness and use the moment as a visible act of reconciliation, sharing the cup together, remembering that Jesus shed his blood for our sins.

At the close of an exhausting day, they all sat in silence for a while. Then one of the BC delegates, a Xhosa woman from the Transkei, got up and went to the wall. She removed one of the pages containing the script of the grievances and came and placed it under the communion table. Then another and another got up and removed the papers from the wall, until the wall was empty and all the papers were placed under the communion table. Another woman got on her hands and knees under the table and packed the papers into a neat pile. The BU and the BC leaders then rose and declared that they would not resurrect the issues that were under the table as they were covered by the blood of Jesus.

I understand that to this day, the issues that caused them such pain have not arisen again to damage the continued process of their reconciliation. Other issues have arisen that still need time and concerted commitment to resolve, but both groups have resolved to work towards their growing unity.

3. Peace making by coming face to face with government – meeting with Tony Blair in the lead-up to the Iraq War 2003

I recall the front-page picture in the Baptist Times of 20 February 2003, which showed leading Baptists participating in the ‘Stop the War’ march of a million people. Norman Kember was among those who had encouraged me to take part in the ‘Stop the War’ march and I had invited the current and three recent BUGB Presidents to join me on the march. It was an important act of leadership for British Baptists as well as a personally significant moment. Many months later I was told by Denton Lotz that some Baptists in the USA had seen my picture with the placard ‘Stop the War’ and commented to him that ‘we hope *he* will never be considered for the BWA Presidency’. God moves in mysterious ways!

Prior to the march there had been hours of consultation between representatives of the denominations pondering what kind of representations should be made to the Prime Minister, Tony Blair. The leadership of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) was taking a lead in these deliberations and, as a member of the Steering Committee for CTBI, I was fully aware of the diplomatic tensions among the churches that were flowing round the central concern of the potential invasion of Iraq. There were two pressing issues that had to be taken into account - the first concerned the Archbishop of Canterbury-elect and the other an approach CTBI had received from a group of church leaders from the USA led by Jim Wallis.

In normal circumstances, the Church of England (as one of the largest member bodies in CTBI) was looked to as a resource of knowledge and inside contacts. But our discussions as church leaders and the ‘Stop the War’ March took place within two weeks of the enthronement of Dr Rowan Williams on 27 February and understandably Lambeth Palace was very cautious about involving the Archbishop of Canterbury-elect in any political initiatives that might detract from the spiritual significance of inaugurating Rowan Williams into his national ministry. The Church of England made it plain they would prefer no senior bishop should become involved in any political representations for the same reason of not wanting anything to distract attention from the impending enthronement of the new Archbishop.

At the same time the social justice activist Jim Wallis had formed a coalition of concerned church leaders in the USA and they had requested an audience with President George W. Bush so they could present their concerns personally. This request had been refused so they decided to bring their concerns this side of the Atlantic in the hope that the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, might accede to their request. Through existing church connections with Claire Short, then serving as Secretary of State for International Development, Tony Blair agreed to meet a delegation of US and British church leaders led by Jim Wallis.

CTBI decided that six British church leaders should form part of the twelve-person delegation and, as Jim Wallis had an American Baptist in his delegation, it was felt a British Baptist should be included and I was invited to join the group. It was mildly unnerving to be in No 10 just days after marching in the 'Stop the War' protest!

The US/UK delegation knew they were meeting with the British Prime Minister at the eleventh hour when the world was poised on the edge of war. Church leaders both sides of the Atlantic had been warning their political leaders of the potentially disastrous consequences of war with the danger of civilian casualties and a destabilising of the Middle East. They were also aware of the need to defeat Saddam Hussein and his brutal regime as failure to stand firm could also produce catastrophic circumstances for the civilian population of Iraq and the wider region of the Middle East. In the face of this moral dilemma the church leaders were proposing a 'third way' as an alternative to war.

The following elements of the 'third way' informed our discussions with Tony Blair at Downing Street on 18 February 2003⁵:

1. Remove Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath party from power.
2. Enforce coercive disarmament.
3. Foster a democratic Iraq.
4. Organise immediately a massive humanitarian effort for the people of Iraq.
5. Recommit to a road map to peace for the Middle East.
6. Reinvigorate and sustain the war against terrorism.

Point one relied on the United Nations establishing an international tribunal to indict Saddam Hussein's regime for war crimes against humanity.

Point two addressed the need to intensify intrusive weapons inspections in Iraq.

Point three favoured the presence of an international armed force rather than a military invasion to establish a democratic opposition.

The fourth point addressed the urgent need to make immediate plans to alleviate civilian suffering post any war. The provision of humanitarian aid had to be a priority.

The fifth point stated that the road to peace in the Middle East leads through Jerusalem not Baghdad. The root cause of Middle East conflict was the failure to commit to a peace plan that would deliver a secure Israel and a viable Palestine state.

Point six was warning of the danger of an Iraq war diverting attention from the war on terrorism and the danger of anti-Western sentiment being fuelled at a time when the West needed the co-operation of the Arab world to defeat terrorism.

During the meeting we were impressed that Tony Blair entered into a real dialogue with the delegation, and the atmosphere in the room was cordial and the American members of the delegation expressed particular appreciation that Tony Blair had agreed to meet with them when their own President had refused them a meeting.

⁵ Jim Wallis' account of the visit is in *God's Politics- why the American Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (Lion 2005), pages 133-136.

None of us doubted we were meeting a political leader wrestling with the greatest of moral dilemmas. Tony Blair is on record as saying 'I was between numerous rocks and innumerable hard places'⁶ and he lost nothing by giving almost an hour to a representative group of church leaders.

The greatest value for the delegation was our opportunity to speak face to face with a Prime Minister in a such a clear way that no one would be able to look back and say the church was silent on the moral issue of war with Iraq. The church should never feel helpless when it appears to be five minutes to midnight.

Not all have the opportunity of face to face meetings but in democratic societies we do have the freedom to compose letters to the national press and organise petitions for the signatures of thousands of supporters; there is the noise of the protest march and the silence of the prayer vigil; seasons of public hunger strikes and peaceful acts of civil disobedience can speak to the conscience of political leaders. But the ultimate sign to 'principalities and powers' in despotic regimes is the acts of the courageous martyrs who overcome 'by the word of their testimony, by the blood of the Lamb and because they do not love their lives so much as to shrink from death' (Revelation 12:11). In all these ways the Peace Church bears convictional witness to the ruling powers.

4. Peace making as prophetic denunciation **- Martin Accad and the Israel invasion of Lebanon 2006**

There are so many examples to choose from under this heading but I have selected a personal episode from the life of my friend Martin Accad who is a theologian who moves between the Arab Baptist Seminary, Beirut and Fuller Seminary, Pasadena, California. His reaction to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006 demonstrates that members of the Peace Church are sometimes angry prophets.

In the summer of 2006 Martin had come to the USA to teach a course for two weeks and found himself, in his own words, 'at the wrong place at the wrong time'. He declared he was stranded after Beirut airport was sent up in flames by Israeli jets. He bewailed the capture of two Israeli soldiers imprisoned by Hezbollah hands and the 10,000 Arabs in Israeli jails, and depicted himself as 'one poor soul imprisoned in the USA by human madness and bloodthirsty governments.'

At the height of the invasion Martin wrote a scathing article that was published in the web edition of *Christianity Today*. He poured out his righteous anger in every direction. He was angry at those evangelicals who in their mis-reading of the Bible believe that apocalyptic destruction is a precursor to global salvation; he was angry that Hezbollah took a unilateral decision to go to war without consulting the Lebanese government; he turned his prophetic anger against Israel for an out of proportion reaction; he was angry at the USA for using its veto at the UN to prevent resolutions that would be helpful to the Lebanese people; he was angry with the international community for keeping silent and not even budging with an official condemnation of the senseless instinct of extermination.

⁶ Tony Blair *A Journey* (Hutchinson 2010) page 424

I read this prophetic denunciation in the midst of a calm summer's day and I still recall the disturbance it generated in my spirit. It was a reminder that peacemakers sometimes burn with prophetic anger in order to overturn the tables of silent complicity and passive indifference⁷.

5. Peace making by fostering creative dialogue after war and genocide - Joao Matwawana of Angola

Joao Matwawana is an Angolan who has assumed Canadian citizenship. He has lived a large part of his life in the context of armed violence and knows personally the hardships suffered by the victims of war and genocide. Although Joao was born in Angola he has been greatly used in peacemaking dialogue in Rwanda and the surrounding regions⁸. He and his wife felt called to organise workshops and seminars for pastors and church leaders that would address the theme: *'The role of the Rwandan Church before during and after the genocide'*.

Pastors and church leaders from seven denominations participated in the seminars. They were divided into groups of three; one would tell his story, the second was asked to repeat it, and the third to evaluate it and point out what was missing. Participants were told: 'You may scream and cry while telling your story. You are allowed to do that, but others must listen.'

Joao said people were initially unwilling to dialogue. They would resist by saying, 'We did not do any wrong. All we did was avenge the suffering caused to our families. The other side were the criminals. They were very bad people. What I did was my duty.'

To counter this resistance and encourage dialogue, Joao used effectively three components of the human anatomy: the head, the heart and the hands. The head represents the mind and encourages a reflection on the planning and thinking we sometimes go through before we do something wrong. The straight question in the seminar was 'Do you think genocide was an accident?' One Hutu Pastor replied: "No, it was not an accident. Our people had been thinking and talking about killing for a long time but, as a pastor, I did not believe that it would ever happen.'

The second step is a reflection on the heart, which represents the motivation behind the genocide. The patient process was designed to convince people that the heart is capable of designing the most dreadful acts of evil. Only as we focus on God's power to open the heart for cleansing can we begin to walk the road to being changed.

Finally, the hands represent the concrete actions of performing evil actions. In the workshops they speak openly about the use of machetes, axes and hoes in the act of murder. Hands are a symbol of hostility or friendship. When the hand is liberated it brings friendship and blessing because you are given the power to shake hands with the enemy.

⁷ Martin Accad article *Evangelical blindness on Lebanon* in *Christianity Today* 17 July 2006

⁸ *Wars are never enough: the Joao Matwawana story* by John F. Keith (Bay Ridge Books 2005)

The distinctive Christian contribution to reconciliation is underlined by Matwawana when he records: 'The component introduced by a specifically Christian approach to reconciliation is the component of repentance and forgiveness. This is something which all these others organisations are missing. They introduce principles of mediation, reconciliation and conflict management. They introduce the participants to all these things but what happens is that these people hear it all, yet remain unmoved from their affirmation that they only did what was right and was expected of their culture.... they think that as long as you teach people how to reconcile and how to solve the differences that is enough. *But the heart is not touched*'⁹

6. Peace making through a discipleship reading of the Bible - Glen Stassen and the *Just Peacemaking* initiative

Occasionally you meet someone on your travels and wish they had been a formative influence in your growing years as a Christian disciple. For me Glen Stassen is such a person. He is the Lewis Smedes Professor of Christian Ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary and is one of our outstanding Baptist scholars in Christian ethics and biblical interpretation. He has written a number of books including *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in a Contemporary Context* (IVP 2003) that won the Christianity Today award for the best book in theology and ethics for 2004.

His book on the Sermon on the Mount is a great introduction to his single great passion as a bible teacher, namely that Bible-believing Christians must recognise the Lordship of Christ over all areas of human life. Stassen maintains that taking seriously the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount requires each local church to teach its members the three paradigms for the ethics of peace and war - just war, pacifism and just peacemaking. He says 'If they don't know ethics, members have no Christian guidance when debates about peace and war arise. They are undefended against ideologies that blow back and forth through our nations and our churches'. Stassen argues that when churches teach all three, church members are not forced into one ethic; they can decide prayerfully which ethic seems right to them.

Last year the Keswick Convention invited me to address the theme of *Love your enemies* from the passage of Matthew 5:43-48. Of all the sayings of Jesus 'love your enemies' is one of the best known and it was the most quoted verse in the early church when disciples were facing persecution. It is a deeply relevant word for our world today. We have just left the 20th century termed by Alexander Solzhenitsyn as 'the caveman century' with 100 million people killed in world wars, 100 million dying in acts of political repression and 100 million butchered in sectarian and ethnic violence. This tough saying of Jesus 'love your enemies' has to be obeyed in a very violent world. If you want to be a follower of Jesus then you must love people as God loves people and this includes enemies.

⁹ *Wars are never enough* page 280

¹⁰ Glen H. Stassen *Living the Sermon on the Mount - a practical hope for Grace and Deliverance* (John Wiley and Sons 2006)

¹¹ *Applying the Practices of Just Peacemaking* article by Glen Stassen in *Theology News and Notes* Fuller Theological Seminary Spring 2009

In preparing my sermon I viewed this familiar passage through the interpretative lens of what Glen Stassen calls the *transforming initiative*. All through the ministry of Jesus you can see observe this '*transforming initiative*'. When Jesus sees people in need he takes an initiative that transforms the situation. The *transforming initiative* is an action that changes the situation. For example Zacchaeus in Luke 19: 1-10 is the story of a man who was an enemy of the people because his work as a chief tax collector had brought poverty and misery to many people. He was probably guilty of taking bribes and perpetrating injustice. Jesus takes a transforming initiative and chooses to meet this enemy of the community by visiting his home and speaking with him privately and a fruitful meeting concludes with Zacchaeus saying: 'Half of my possessions I give to the poor and if I cheated anyone I will repay them back four times'.

Jesus is committed to 'transforming initiatives' with the enemy and these verses provide more examples. In Matthew 5 verse 38 the old way of dealing with the enemy was legal retribution - 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', but Jesus calls his disciples to take some transforming initiatives. He says 'Don't resist an evil person' (verse 39) and in a violent world 'if you are grossly insulted and struck on the cheek then offer the other cheek' (v 39). In verse 40, if someone wants to sue you in court because you can't pay your bills then shame them by taking the clothes of your back and offering not only your coat but also your shirt. By standing in court half naked you will shame the unjust person. In verse 41, if you are forced to go the mile by a Roman soldier then surprise the soldier by offering to walk the second mile.

Each of these examples illustrates the principle of the *transforming initiative* and Jesus strengthens the initiative by providing three reasons why we should love the enemy.

First we love the enemy because it is Godlike. We display the family likeness when we love the enemy (v 45).

Second, we love the enemy because it is a unique demonstration of love (vv 46-47). In a culture which cultivates retaliation and 'hate the enemy' is normal, we are called to witness that God provides the motive and the power to love the enemy.

Third, we love the enemy because it is mature. Jesus said 'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (v 48) which does not mean perfect in the sense of sinless perfection. Be perfect is a call to be mature followers of Jesus which means:

Wanting to live a life of obedience to Jesus

Longing to reflect a Christlike family likeness

Desiring to love people as Jesus did - without discrimination

I am increasingly convinced that we cannot take on the wars of the world unless we face the conflicts of the home, the warfare of the workplace and the skirmishes of the church. A disciple's reading of the Bible will enable us to learn afresh how to be peacemakers first in the home, second in the church and third in the workplace. A fresh reading of the Bible is a very Baptist way of approaching discipleship!

7. Peace making by discerning the initiatives of the Holy Spirit – the Baptists of Jordan and the Baptism Centre

My final example of Baptists as Peacemakers is a very personal story that begins with a scheduled visit to the Middle East in September 2007 and it serves to illustrate how we need to be sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in his good government of our lives.

I was on a four-country visit to the Middle East conducting conferences for pastors and church leaders in Lebanon, Israel, Palestine and Jordan. I was particular concerned to discover more about Christian-Muslim relations given that together these two world religions comprise of almost 50% of the world's population. When I arrived in Jordan I discovered the local Baptist leadership had arranged for me to visit King Abdullah II of Jordan to explore with him the possibility of greater religious liberty for Baptists and Evangelicals in Jordan.

The Baptist leaders of Jordan could not have realised that this meeting with the King would prove so perfect in God's timing. Through an initiative inspired by the Royal Court of Jordan, 38 Muslim Scholars were about to circulate to Christian denominations worldwide a copy of a letter that they had written to the Pope. This landmark letter became known as *A Common Word*, so called because the scholars in their letter suggested that foundational to both Islam and Christianity was the twin command to love the One God and love the neighbour. These moderate Muslim scholars through their letter to the Pope (with representative Islamic scholars from around the world as co-signatories) were making a major peace initiative to the Christian Church worldwide ¹².

At the commencement of the audience with King Abdullah II of Jordan we first congratulated the King on his March 2007 eloquent address to the US Congress and shared our mutual concerns for peace in the Middle East. The King then gave the delegation the advance notice that in a matter of weeks the *Common Word* letter was being sent to the Pope and that the leadership of the Baptist World Alliance would be included as named recipients of this significant letter. The King shared his conviction that without peace and justice between Christians and Muslims there could be no meaningful peace in the world. Looking back, this audience with the King gave an early warning to the BWA of the deep significance of the *Common Word* letter and it enabled us to be better prepared for the various responses which would flow from the BWA in the months after the letter was issued.

The other major development in the discussion was the surprisingly generous offer by the King to donate a piece of land with buildings in the area by the River Jordan known in the Bible as 'Bethany beyond Jordan', the region where John the Baptist baptised Jesus. Subsequent to this visit in September 2007 the King was true to his word and the *Baptism Centre* was built and constructed at The Baptism Site in Jordan. It was subsequently opened in March 2009 in the presence of Prince Ghazi of Jordan and Tony Blair as the Middle East envoy ¹³.

¹² See www.acommonword.com the official web site for *A Common Word*

¹³ See www.baptismsite.com for the full story and authentication of the Jordan Baptism Site

Over 2,000 people attended the opening and heard a message from the BWA General Secretary Dr. Neville Callam and to mark the opening 120 people were baptised at the newly dedicated Baptist Centre.

Later that day a number of Baptist theologians, including Dr Paul Fiddes and Dr Nick Woods of Regents Park College Oxford, participated in informal theological conversations with Prince Ghazi, the main drafter of *A Common Word* and the person designated by the King to negotiate with us for the opening of the Baptism Centre.

The whole process from meeting King Abdullah II to the opening of the Baptism Centre had taken around 18 months and it was a remarkable example of Muslim-Christian partnership best summed up by an elderly Jordanian Baptist who said to me after the dedication of the Baptism Centre: 'This is the Lord's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes'.

Some close encounters with a leading Muslim scholar prompted some deep thinking on my part. I had enjoyed some moments of significant sharing with Prince Ghazi and eventually I listed the five convictions that I felt should shape conversations between Christians and Muslims.

- 1) We need a bold humility in sharing what our Christian faith means to us. When there is a meeting of different faiths it requires every party to be faithful to their own convictions and respectful of others.
- 2) We need to give greater attention to mentioning the Bible in our conversations. Other faith traditions have a place of honour for their sacred scriptures and frequently quote from a relevant passage. When Christians fail to do this it appears we do not honour our own holy scriptures.
- 3) We need to be unafraid to confess our sins. Christian history includes bloody crusades and inquisitions, social intolerance and intellectual bigotry. Vinoth Ramachandra suggests that any sharing of the gospel has to begin with the humble acknowledgement of betrayals of the gospel by the church itself.
- 4) We need to be truthful about the woeful lack of religious liberty in Muslim states. It is morally wrong for Islamic regimes to subscribe to the UN Declaration of Human Rights and to prohibit freedom of religious worship and conversion among their citizens. And it is doubly hypocritical for their citizens to enjoy those rights when living in a foreign country whilst denying the same liberty to foreigners living in their home country.
- 5) We need to demonstrate the virtues and graces of Christian discipleship in the power of the Holy Spirit. In the history of the Church, the most fruitful witness is always the demonstration of humbly following Jesus with a spirit of joyful and loving service.

You invited me to address the subject of *Baptists as Peacemakers* but I hope you will permit a closing illustration from an Anglican source

When I visited Mozambique in 1993, soon after the civil war ended, I met the inspirational Dinis Salomão Sengulane, the Anglican Bishop of Lebombo, Maputo and Mozambique. I heard his first-hand accounts of how he travelled with other church leaders as peacemakers between the armies of the two warring sides in Mozambique's ten years of civil war. As he stood outside each headquarters of the warring factions, he told me he recited the words of Jesus: 'Blessed are the peacemakers - for they will be called children of God'. Eventually peace came to Mozambique and, like all war-torn countries, there had to be an extensive peace process.

At the end of the civil war in Mozambique, huge numbers of guns were still in circulation and they were a constant threat to the rebuilding of peaceful communities. With other Christian leaders, and in partnership with Christian Aid, Bishop Dinis launched a programme to encourage decommissioning. 'A tool in exchange for arms' was their slogan. Those who handed in arms to be destroyed received in exchange tools that allowed them to work and earn money. These included the gift of a sewing machine, a hoe or a plough. But Bishop Dinis felt it was not enough that the weapons were out of commission. They had to be shown to be part of a new order to reflect the now peaceful communities from where they had come. He invited a group of Mozambican artists to make the weapons speak and tell the story of their past use and their present purpose, and in 2005 their finished work, *The Tree of Life* went on display for three months in the British Museum in London.

The Tree of Life is the sculpture of a tree made of rusting metal weaponry and sheltering in its branches are the birds and animals of Southern Africa. Neil Macgregor, then Director of the Museum, said: 'Every element in the sculpture was designed to bring death. Hundreds of lives were ended or mutilated by these weapons. But the metal also speaks of a new beginning; of individuals and communities refashioned, like the weapons, to a higher purpose. *The Tree of Life* is a supreme image of hope.'¹⁴



As we have observed, the many models of peace making make it a splendid virtue, but its sole purpose is always the beating of swords into ploughshares. I am convinced that God always blesses this Christ-like ministry because it goes with the true grain of His universe.

¹⁴ *A painful resurrection* Neil MacGregor *The Tablet* 2 July 2005