H. Overcoming Violence

Violence—in families, societies and between communities—continues to inflict deep wounds, especially on women, children and youth. Conflict within and between countries devastates land and peoples. How is the God we know in Jesus Christ healing violence in our world today? How do we respond theologically to horrendous acts of violence? How can memories be healed and cycles of violence overcome? How can member churches advocate with others, particularly through the "Decade to Overcome Violence," for the sake of justice, peace and reconciliation?

A violent world

The past century is said to have been the most violent in history—with wars and conflicts having killed an estimated 200 million people. With the end of the ideological confrontations of the Cold War, dormant antagonisms between and within states, ethnic and religious groups have re-emerged, bringing a new unpredictability to the political landscape. In many areas, it seems that revived nationalism based on ethnic, religious and cultural exclusivity, rather than liberal democracy, is filling the vacuum left behind after the fall of Communist regimes.[1] Two thirds of violent conflicts in today's world are within a country. The massive suffering resulting from these conflicts continues to be borne disproportionately by those who already have been victimized and marginalized—socially, psychologically, economically and politically.

War redresses assaults on life by further destroying life; the boundary between innocent and guilty is transgressed; those least powerful socially and politically suffer the most. This is self-defeating, creating a spiral of violence that ends when one side suffers so much death, suffering and loss that it can only capitulate to the more powerful.[2]

Which conflicts have most deeply affected you and your church? How? What other forms of violence especially alarm you?

In addition to armed conflicts between nations and armed groups, "violence" brings to mind:

- Random and targeted killings in our streets, schools and other public places.
- Violence that states inflict on their own citizens, including through such legal means as the death penalty.
- Violence in the name of religion against religious minorities.
- How prisons have become places that breed ever more violent criminals.
- Increasing incidents of violence against immigrants in many countries.
- The prevalence of guns and other weapons in many of our societies, and the vast arms trade between countries.
- How many children have access to guns, and the use of child soldiers.
- The alarming increase of violence against women and children, making "home" for many of them even more dangerous than the streets.
- The built-up rage and desperation that fuels acts of terrorism.
- The extensive violence in sports, video games and other "entertainment" media, that satisfies and feeds aggressive drives.
- The public's increasing numbness and helplessness in the face of violence, making people more susceptible to radical measures that threaten both freedom and justice in society.

In situations of violence, human beings are the victims. Wars, insurrections, or battles for secession or independence involve whole communities, and result not only in the death and injury of civilians, but in the loss of income, homes and social structures. Massive numbers of

A considerable amount of LWF World Service work seeks to bring healing and hope to those displaced and traumatized by such conflicts. Through the Office of International Affairs and Human Rights, the General Secretary regularly speaks to those responsible in situations of conflict around the world. Violence against women is addressed by the Women's Desk in DMD. For more on these activities, see the Six Year Report.

people are displaced, and the majority of victims tend to be women and children.

Forms and causes of violence

The most obvious form of violence is the intentional use of force in order to inflict harm on persons, not only by threatening or taking their lives, but also by excluding, subjugating and dehumanizing them. Terrorism, which stirs up widespread and intense fear and anxiety, involves acts of gross violence by those seeking to intimidate a population or government into granting their demands. It can also be seen as a response to unjust political and economic realities.

Less obvious, but often even more pervasively harmful, are structural forms of violence, which oppress through unjust social systems, and lead to violations of human dignity, suffering and death. These forms of violence—such as when millions of men and women are left without food or a livelihood, dehumanized and left to die—breed self-perpetuating cycles of violence that can be more harmful, massive and insidious than isolated acts of violence. Structural violence is inflicted through economic policies, such as structural adjustment programs, in which basic human needs are ignored for the sake of economic growth, as well as through systemic policies that affect or neglect whole populations. Physical acts of violence often are a desperate response to structural violence.

The term "institutional violence" has been used to describe this structural violence. It is the "violence of the status quo," **which perpetuates** violence against a large number of those within a society.[3] Sometimes this is referred to as "covert" in distinction from "overt" violence. However, this hardly feels covert to those who are its direct victims.

State-sponsored violence is often inflicted on a whole population that may agonizingly observe what is occurring, but feel powerless to change situations in which the government and institutions seem to conspire against them. State terrorism is a symptom of violent political structures. International policies and institutions may also play an indirect role in perpetuating such violence because of what they require from local governments.

Other Village Group chapters are giving more attention to some of the wider causes of violence in our world today, such as

- the lack of a sense of worth or purpose (chapter A),
- the barriers that exclude persons because of their identity or circumstances (chapter E),
- stress and injustice within families (chapter G),
- inter-religious tensions (chapter D),
- forces of economic globalization (chapter I), and
- human domination over and violation of creation (chapter J).

The causes of violence are rooted in political, economic and social systems, es-

pecially those that set people over and against one another and the rest of creation. The failure to provide educational opportunities, or the manipulation of sources of information, can do violence to those affected. Repressing the freedom of expression or action is a form of political and psychological violence. The condescension and subtle forms of discrimination with which the older generation treats those who are younger (or *vice versa*), or men treat women, or one "race" or religious group treats another, are other expressions of this kind of violence. We live in societies in which the drive for personal security, self-esteem or power, and the failure to share responsibility and decision making often inflict violence on others. Violence, therefore, is a condition that entraps us all, although some are far more personally impacted by it.

Share how this may be manifested in your part of the world. What most alarms you about religiously based violence? What should we as churches be saying or doing about it? What risks or difficulties are involved?

Religiously based violence

Violence fueled by religion is especially alarming today. This is not a new phenomenon. For example, when the Joint Declaration on Justification was signed in 1999, it was noted that in Europe this could be viewed as a "peace treaty" because of the many wars between "Lutheran" and "Catholic" lands that have been fought over the last 500 years. Violence can become particularly vicious and entrenched when connected with different religious groups, each of which has ultimate religious commitments.

> When religion is connected with citizenship (the state), nationality or ethnicity it invariably becomes a source of inter-religious violence.[4]

Under the banner of "returning to the fundamentals of faith" and also in efforts to assert their own religious and ethnic identity, religious communities sometimes have encouraged intolerance, dogmatism, exclusion and extremism. When one religious group asserts a sense of superiority over another, aggression against them may be tolerated, justified and even incited. A dramatic recent case in point was the outbreak of violence between Muslims and Hindus in Godhra in the Indian state of Gujarat, resulting in the death of hundreds. Religious fundamentalism encourages triumphalistic exclusivism, and lays the foundation for communal disharmony and sometimes outbursts of violence. Religious leaders have sometimes directed adherents to support one political power against another. This arouses and feeds on emotional and religious sentiments among the people, making it very easy for political as well as religious forces to manipulate them for their own self-serving interests.

These religious dynamics are also often entwined with ethnic identities. Such identities and their aspirations could not be rooted out either by totalitarian socialism or by hegemonic statism. Even if states do not suppress minority or aboriginal identity groups through the use of violence, they tend to subordinate them through policies of assimilation, which attempt to integrate them within a single national framework or common project. In the process, these groups are often subjected to structural violence in the form of discrimination.

Violence against women

Women shoulder the heavy burden of sustaining embattled societies, while at-

tending to traumas, miseries and violence during conflicts. Women are disproportionately represented among refugees or internally displaced persons. Rape of women in situations of war or civil insurgencies seems endemic. Official failure to condemn or punish rape gives it an overt political sanction, implying that rape and other forms of torture and ill treatment are acceptable tools of military strategy.

Most women experience war not as combatants, but as civilians caught in the crossfire. In wars today, the proportion of civilians killed or disabled, compared to combatants, is climbing sharply. In their traditional roles as homemakers, mothers and caregivers, women suffer greatly, losing their husbands and sons as well as their means of subsistence. Long-term military occupation further exposes women to continual threats of sexual violence. Damage done to the environment also affects their bodies and those of the children they bear.

Cultural and religious traditions that keep women passive in the face of such suffering contribute to violence and help justify the perpetuation of violence against women in their homes, on streets and in workplaces throughout the world. The abuse is psychological as well as physical. The resulting shame and humiliation of both the abused and the abusers often keep the violent patterns from being exposed or addressed.

Our calling as people of faith is to challenge whenever religion is used to justify violence against women (or any other group), and to raise up the liberating potential within our faith. We must declare violence against women a sin that damages the image of God in the victim as well as in the perpetrator. If violence against women and children is to stop, men and women must work together to counter it. Women need to become empowered actors and not victims. Similarly, models of masculinity need to be embraced that do not include or depend on exercising dominance over women.

What kinds of violence against women are especially prevalent in your society? How is your church addressing these? What other groups in your society become targets of violence?

Biblical and theological perspectives

The land of Israel/Palestine has been the scene of repeated conflicts throughout biblical times to our own day. Reflecting that context, stories of violence and warfare are found throughout Scripture, including some examples of brutal violence against women. Violence is an all-too-common theme in Scripture, including in many depictions of God that either are violent or seem to justify the use of violence. God is frequently depicted in Hebrew Scripture as a warrior, cooperating with and justifying people's aggression against their enemies, and the destruction of cities, lands and peoples. Yet, since Cain killed Abel (Gen 4), and the soil cried out in horror, those shaped by the biblical story have known that revenge only continues the vicious cycle of violence.

This is not the only or most important emphasis in Scripture. God is also depicted as a God of peace, or *shalom*. *Shalom* is more than the absence of war; it is a promise of the fullness of well-being. "A society so ordered will have *shalom*: rest, security, health, wholeness, well-being, prosperity."[5] *Shalom* includes orderly fruitfulness of the land, policies of equitable justice and practices of generous caring. In other words, *shalom* is the opposite of those conditions that embody and lead to violence. When *shalom* is repudiated, the world falls into violence and chaos.

The Hebrew prophets protested when injustices and rulers eroded God's *shalom*: "They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (Jer 6:14). According to the prophets, God opposes the atrocities of war, or trusting in weapons for security. Weapons of violence are to be converted into instruments of peace (Mic 4:1–4), "and no one shall make them afraid." *Shalom* extended beyond the borders of Israel, to include the worst of her enemies.

Jesus too lived in a situation of institutionalized violence under the occupation of a foreign power. This was reflected in many of his parables and sayings. He often found himself in conflict with the religious leaders, and sometimes was moved to anger. The Gospels record his having used militant imagery: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Mt 10:34). Yet, he also told his disciples to put away their swords, rather than striking out to defend him at the time of his betrayal. He wept over Jerusalem; "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!" (Lk 19:42).

Jesus chose to identify with the prophetic rather than the warrior strain in Hebrew Scripture. In healing stories Jesus often was referred to as a prophet. The peace (*shalom*) that he extended to those he healed brought health and wholeness. On the basis of this same *shalom*, he critiqued those who took advantage of the poor.

> The war that is open to Jesus' followers is not war against other nations, but war against hypocrisy and greed and cruelty and injustice, war against all the demonic systems and powers that cripple and cramp and pervert the humanity of human beings.[6]

In the face of hostility and persecution, Jesus tended to withdraw from confrontation with those who opposed him. He followed a course of nonviolent resistance and counseled his followers to do likewise. He taught forgiveness rather than revenge, and rebuked those who proposed revenge against those who rejected him (Lk 9:52–56). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called for persistent and imaginative efforts to decrease and to overcome violence. Do

We hope for the future of the one whose life began with the slaughter of the innocents, the one who experienced the terrorism of the state on the cross, the one who died for a world that seems ruled by violence and hatred, the one who descended into hell and therefore can stand with all who suffer for any kind of terrorism. We see in the resurrection of the crucified one the beginning of the defeat of evil and terror and thus the objective ground for staying in hope for this world.[8]

not react violently against the one who is evil, or you will become a reflection of them (Mt 5:39). Most radical of all, he calls his followers to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Lk 6:27).

This way of living led to a violent death on the cross. "God's son on the cross is perhaps the greatest challenge the church can bring to a world shaken by violence."[7] Rather than a myth of redemptive violence, which only serves to perpetuate violence, our faith is in a God who through forgiveness and reconciliation breaks the cycle of violence.

Churches committed to overcome violence

From this perspective, the central commitment of the Ecumenical Decade to Overcome Violence is not naïve. It is rooted in the core of the faith the church confesses, in a crucified and risen Christ, who overcame violence through nonviolent resistance to those conditions that lead to and are themselves violent.

> The church is called to nonviolence not to preserve its purity but to express its fidelity. Nonviolence is not a law but a gift…. The gospel is not concerned in the least with our anxiety to *be* right; it wants to *see right done*.... In the final analysis, nonviolence is not a matter of legalism but of discipleship. It is the way God has chosen to overthrow evil in the world.[9]

Overcoming violence is not simply a missionary task underpinned by selected biblical passages.[10] What is challenging is to end self-generating cycles of violence of whatever kind, whether in the Middle East, the Balkans, Africa, Asia, in the streets of our communities, or the bedrooms of our homes. In any situation where one group holds the power, and others are left dependent, injustices fester and are often reinforced and perpetuated by violence.

At the root of violence is the issue of power. In a relation involving two parties, one exerts aggressive power over the other. How can this power be countered? The immediate tendency is to react by striking back, using an act of violence in an attempt to counter the violence. As is only too apparent, this often leads to a counterattack, or the onset of an escalating cycle of violence. Striking back or struggling against violence often results in greater violence or oppression on the part of the stronger party.

> Out of anger the perpetrator of violence expects the powerful to lash out in counterviolence, a greater degree of violence, against the powerless.[11]

How do you see cycles of violence being perpetuated? Being stopped?

Therefore, churches must work with others to:

- Speak out against both overt and covert violence, and especially its root causes in particular situations. Because it may be risky for a church directly involved to do so,

it is important that we do so on behalf of one another, in solidarity as a communion. This occurs through both prayer and advocacy.

- Overcome the spirit, logic and practice of violence as a way of dealing with conflicts, for example, through
  - training in nonviolent resistance,
  - conflict mediation,
  - challenging images, including in Scripture and the media, that condition us to react violently,
  - examining the stories we pass on about those who are different ("enemies"),
  - education for the peaceful resolution of differences,
  - community building across divisions,
  - forming peacemaking groups at the grass roots, and
  - opening up spaces where the truth can be spoken without fear of reprisal.
- Advocate for policies that will help to overcome violence:
  - Hold accountable those who commit acts of violence against women, children and other vulnerable groups.
  - Advance democracy, human rights and religious liberty.
  - Foster just and sustainable economic development.
  - Work with emerging cooperative forces in the international system.
- Strengthen the United Nations and other international organizations.
- Reduce offensive weapons trade.

What else should the churches be doing to overcome violence?

Continue exploring ethical questions related to the use of violence

Included in our Lutheran Confessions is Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession, which focuses on the so-called "just war" criteria for bringing moral restraint into situations in which warfare is being considered or already underway.[12] The rigorous application of these criteria would rule out most situations as failing to meet conditions that would justify warfare. Nevertheless, an increasing number of Christians have questioned the appropriateness of the just war tradition. Just war criteria are limited in helpfulness insofar as violence usually erupts in the midst of long-standing hostilities that have already involved considerable violence on both sides.

Among the critical observations raised in a 1993 LWF study of this just war tradition,[13] were that:

- In most cases the just **cause** can no longer be identified because the reasons for a war lie above all in social and economic injustices, historically developed enemy images and in notions of threat.
- The proportionality of **means** is no longer a given, due to the development of military technology,

global strategies and the extension of war to include the civilian population.

- The right **intention** is no longer possible under the conditions of modern technology, because what should be protected will be destroyed.

In the light of developments in military technology and strategy, "it is fundamentally questioned whether war may still be conducted as the continuation of politics by other means."[14]

While Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession concerned the use of force between nations, the question that has arisen more recently is whether the international community can responsibly engage in specific, limited military action in situations of anarchy and genocide. This question was considered in a paper received by the LWF Council in 2000.[15] In some extreme situations, power is blatantly misused leading to massive violations of human rights and the devastating destruction of communities. Such violations are either generated by the ruling authorities or such that these authorities lack the capacity to counter. It is to such overt, systemic manifestations of sin—which become evil—that our focus is drawn when the question of armed intervention to defend human rights is considered.

The ethical dilemma of armed intervention is that it is a violent means of seeking to redress such violations. Some are opposed in principle to any use of violence for the purpose of ending or lessening violence; violence begets more violence. Others contend that decisive actions are needed to stop what is likely to be even greater violence.

Threats of force and the use of military action can protect life and secure peace only in the short term. In the long run, peace can only be secured when fundamental human rights are respected and just conditions established. Therefore, it is the task and primary responsibility of all parties to seek to solve conflicts through negotiation and by peaceful means. Even so, in this sinful world the threat of the use of military action may seem unavoidable, in order to protect human life, to limit killing and to prevent even greater suffering.

The tension between the principle of non-intervention in the affairs of a sovereign state versus the responsibility of the international community to ensure respect for human rights reveals that, first of all, the concept of sovereignty is in transition; this transition is linked to international accountability. Secondly, international law or agreed upon norms have not yet been developed to reflect these changes. In such a situation, the ethical challenge is to balance the legal principle of state sovereignty with the ethical imperative of protecting human life.

Armed intervention for humanitarian purposes can only be contemplated when all attempts at preventative diplomacy have failed. These preventative initiatives must always form the context of discussions within which any decision regarding armed intervention for humanitarian purposes is considered or undertaken. Such intervention must be considered strictly as a last resort for the protection of human life when it is threatened by gross and egregious violations of human rights, and only under clearly defined and restricted criteria.

Should the LWF have a clear position on this dilemma? If so, what factors and ethical principles should guide our thinking and action?

Furthermore, there are important theological and ethical questions to be pursued regarding the relationship between vulnerability and security,[16] insofar as this relates to the overcoming of

violence. Recognizing vulnerability as something fundamentally human leads to the recognition that the security of others is our joint, cooperative responsibility. This is underlined because enmity and conflict arise especially when people feel vulnerable. Recognition of our vulnerability and that of others is a prerequisite for a deeper understanding of security. Security in our day, when it can no longer be linked primarily to state sovereignty, must be linked directly to vulnerable persons and their need for protection against whatever threatens their survival and freedom. This involves social, economic, environmental and not primarily military aspects of security. Human rights for all becomes a crucial security issue.

We must not remove vulnerability, but defend it, so that human beings can continue to be vulnerable, and therefore human. Theologically grounded perspectives such as these can be an important contribution of churches to the global challenge of overcoming violence.

What is the strategic role of human rights in the work to overcome violence? What other theological/ethical challenges to overcoming violence should we as a communion of churches be addressing? How will you and your church be participating in the Ecumenical Decade to Overcome Violence?

Notes

[1] Jeanne Vickers, *Women and War* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1993), p. 1.

[2] Lisa Sowle Cahill, "The Danger of Violence and the Call to Peace," in Jon L. Berquist, *Strike Terror No More*: *Theology, Ethics, and the New War* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), pp. 222–223.

[3] Robert McAfee Brown, *Religion and Violence* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1973), pp. 34–35.

[4] T. K. Oommen, "Religion as Source of Violence," in *Ecumenical Review* 53:2 (April 2001), p. 175.

[5] Albert Curry Winn, *Ain't Gonna Study War No More: Biblical Ambiguity and the Abolition of War* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 87.

[6] *Ibid*., p. 146.

[7] Margot Kässman, *Overcoming Violence* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1998), p. 40.

[8] M. Douglas Meeks, "What Can We Hope for Now?," in Berquist, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 254.

[9] Walter Wink, "We Must Find a Better Way," in Berquist, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 335.

[10] Fernando Enns, "Breaking the Cycle of Violence," in *Ecumenical Review* 53:2 (April 2001), p. 181.

[11] Fumitaka Matsuoka, "For This the Earth Shall Mourn," in Berquist, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 53.

[12] Principles for deciding whether a war is just include right intention, justifiable cause, legitimate authority, last resort, declaration of war aims, proportionality and reasonable chance of success. Principles for conducting war include noncombatant immunity and proportionality.

[13] Viggo Mortensen (ed.), *War, Confession and Conciliarity: What does "just war" in the Ausgsburg Confession mean today?*, Vorlagen, Neue Folge, Heft 18 (Hanover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1993).

[14] *Ibid*, p. 52.

[15] Agenda for the Meeting of the LWF Council, 2000, Exhibit 17.3, "Armed Intervention to Defend Human Rights: A Discussion Paper" from which the sentences that follow are excerpted.

[16] The following insights are excerpted from *Vulnerability and Security*, prepared by the Commission on International Affairs of the Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations (2000).

FOR THE HEALING OF THE WORLD