

The Anglican Church of Melanesia (ACOM) work in developing a programmatic response towards ethnic conflict in Solomon Islands (1998 – 2003). A paper prepared and presented at the Anglican Alliance Forum in Tabalia on 7/9/011.

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## **Introduction**

Many of you have read about the ethnic conflict in Solomon Islands in books, news papers and saw it on the television, therefore, I have no intention to repeat the history. However, it is important to note that **the ethnic conflict in the Solomons since 1998 and through to 2003 had caught churches by surprise. However, that surprise has given** individual churches to respond to the situation using whatever necessary pastoral approaches to reconcile warring parties [Malaia Eagle Force (MEF) and the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) or the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GLA)] to restore peace with very little effect.

For decades churches in Solomon Islands had concentrated largely on the pastoral ministries but little preparation was given towards any volatile situation such as ethnic conflict. **However, that surprise has given churches in Solomon Islands an opportunity to consider a new pathway to conflict resolution.**

Prior to presenting the Anglican Church of Melanesia programmatic responses to ethnic conflict in Solomon Islands, perhaps it would be more helpful to proceed with the challenges which ACOM and other churches had encountered as they responded to the conflict.

### **1. Challenges Encountered**

There were numerous challenges encountered by the churches during and after the ethnic tensions. I shall briefly highlight some of them.

- a. Churches had **not fully prepared itself to deal with a violent situation**, especially in areas of mediation and caring for the victims and sufferers.
- b. Members of the militia groups were from different churches therefore it was difficult for one denomination, to deal effectively with such diversity. Ecumenical relationship was of no effect in a fighting situation. Nevertheless, the tensions itself had also reawaken Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA) on two grounds which gave time for churches to refocus.
  - First, there was a realisation that each member church could not handle the tensions alone.
  - Secondly, when the government became hopeless, because people lost their trust in it, SICA was asked to take the lead on peace talks. This encouraged SICA churches to remain united in dealing with the situation.

- c. The Solomon Islands Government method in addressing the situation, especially the issue of compensation of lost properties is seen as a major challenge to reconciliation mission of ACOM during and after the tensions.

Notwithstanding, in hind sight the action taken by the government paying compensation is like putting a cart before the horse. Compensation as such did not bring reconciliation but has brought in (more injustices) and also a lot of social problems.

**Anything to right the wrong by the government in such situation was not compensation but establishing law and order.** Should the government had taken this direction it would be in a better position to administer compensation issue and other related issues of the ethnic tensions.

Consequently, the Government's mishandling of the compensation of lost properties and false promises angered the victims who have found it difficult to reconcile with their perpetrators.

- d. The **conflict had been politicized** for the following key factors:

- Centralisation of socio-economic development in capital Honiara.
- Bonafide demands by the Guadalcanal Provincial Government and people such as:

A return of land perpetual ownership

Exploitation of natural resources by non Guadalcanal people

Recognition to compensate for criminal activities committed within the province

These are all national and political issues and perhaps the government did not see the church could play major roles in reconciliation.

- e. Other NGOs stepped in with the government with their own motives. They poured in money, equipments and infrastructure development in Malaita and Guadalcanal. While acknowledging these approaches, they have brought in wrong concept and mentality. For instance, reconciliation and peace are achieved through materialism rather than from the heart. Secondly, such attitude has created handout mentality.
- f. The breakdown of Law and Order during the tension has caused drastic increase of antisocial problems during and after the conflict which often prolonged or even delayed reconciliation processes.

- g. The church depended very much on outside donors and other mission partners to carry out her programmatic responses.** Very common to all Aid donors, there was no flexibility and funds were delayed had affected the process. **Sustainability issue comes into questioned because the programs are very heavily donor dependent. This is the conflict that the churches must sooner or later resolve in order to advance programs.**

## **2. ACOM's Programmatic Responses**

Now I come to a full side from my opening remarks. I did say churches were caught unprepared. In answer to that I shall now embark on ACOM's programmatic responses in the wake of the ethnic conflict and beyond. As I have alluded to in my introduction, it took some time for ACOM to respond strategically and systematically towards the situation. I shall give some examples.

- a. The Religious Orders –** The ACOM responded immediately to the situation through her four Religious Communities led by the Melanesia Brotherhood or the Tarsius.

People continue to look to the Religious Communities, especially the Melanesian Brotherhood (and more generally the church) as the only institution having the integrity to save the country.”<sup>1</sup>

Members of the Melanesian Brotherhood became the “go betweens” during the three years of conflict.

Their mission of reconciliation, peace and disarmament was extremely dangerous which in the end saw the death of seven Melanesian Brothers killed by Harold Keke and his men.

Nevertheless, the mission of the Melanesian Brotherhood did not stop until the ethnic war subsided to a level where possible actions and programming could take place in the church.

- b. Mission of the Mothers Union (MU) -** The next group to appear in the scene at the height of the conflict were the Mothers Union (MU) members.

Using their meagre resources they reached out to bringing basic supplies to the women and children on the Guadalcanal plains. This was dangerous work, often the MU members were held at gun point and harassed by militant groups of both warring parties.

However, these women persevered because their members were affected. Joining forces with women from other churches they visited the bunkers pleading with the militants to lay down their guns.

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<sup>1</sup> Rt. Revd. Terry Brown: “The role of Religious Communities in Peacemaking: The Solomon Islands” Prepared for Anglican Religious Life.

- c. **Mission Consultation** - held in Honiara on 16 – 19 June 2003 sees the church beginning to become tactical in her approach to the mission of reconciliation and peace in the light of the ethnic crisis in Solomon Islands.

Take for instance, alcohol and drug abuse, violence of all forms in the homes, and increased teenage pregnancy, decline of community values just to name a few, are vehicles of conflicts and disharmony in the society. Seen in this context the mission consultation was essentially a missiological response to these problems induced by the ethnic conflict.

The short Term, Mid Term and Long Term action plans are based on capacity building and also to strengthen existing structures and resources so as to enable the church to deal effectively with the situation, and also to manage the change.

- d. **Inclusive Community Program (ICP)** – is in various ways embraced the action plans of the mission consultation. It was established early in 2004 in response to rebuilding people's lives which were affected by the ethnic conflict. This was a nationwide program.

Its overall objective was to strengthen communities to have increased governance capacity for self-reliance and peace through (1) the participation of women and young people in community decision-making processes, and (2) community oriented conflict resolution processes. These were:

- **Participatory Community Management** workshops at the local community level. The week-long gender and age disaggregated workshops aim toward community agreements that will support these initiatives. **These were open to all on the basis of need rather than religious or other affiliation.**
- **Participatory Community and Social Development** training for about 1200 community-level church workers and volunteers. A key strategy of the ICP was **to build capacity of church workers and volunteers to provide ongoing support to the outcomes of the Participatory Community Management workshops.**
- **Community Capacity Strengthening** follow-up activities. To follow up on the PCM workshops, this was demand-driven needs-based support delivered by third party organisations and coordinated by the church dioceses. They included **youth life-skills, women's literacy, peace conferencing activities and building capacity of traditional leadership** who will later help with peace and reconciliation work in the church.

- e. **The Christian Care Centre (CCC)** – In 2005, two years after the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) had restored law and order, ACOM officially opened a Christian Care Centre (CCC) which cares for victims of domestic violence. This centre is a few kilo metres east of Honiara and it is run by the four Religious Orders: Melanesian Brotherhood (MBH), Society of Saint Francis (SSF), Community of Sisters of Melanesia (CSM) and

Community of Sisters of the Church (CSC). **The CCC is a centre for caring, counselling and reconciling conflicting families.**

**f. Justice, Reconciliation and Peace Steering Committee**

In 2007 (by this time) the Anglican Church of Melanesia recognised that the process of reconciliation and peace in Solomon Islands had changed from an emergency to a more longer term one.

However, it was realized that in the Dioceses of Central Melanesia, Central Solomon and Malaita, there were still outstanding reconciliation needs for those who had been directly affected by the ethnic tension. A Steering Committee was formed to set a direction on how the church would be able to respond to such needs.

In 2008 the Steering Committee conducted a **Justice, Reconciliation and Peace consultation which was** held in Honiara from April 28 to 1<sup>st</sup> of May. The primary objective of this consultation was to set the way forward for ACOM's ministry of Reconciliation and Peace building.

The consultation was widely represented by Priests, Bishops, representatives of the four Religious Orders, government officials from the Ministry of National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace, former militants, chiefs, youths and the Mothers Union from the church in Solomon Islands.

This peace consultation considers healing of past hurts to be the way forward in reconciliation in Solomon Islands' situation. It also recognises that reconciliation involves healing of not only physical injury and loss but also spiritual conflict.

Following a recommendation made from the consultation, a Commission on Justice, Reconciliation and Peace was formally established and it later became part of the church canon. The establishment of the Commission demonstrates the fact that ACOM is becoming more strategically in dealing with conflicts.

**3. The Commission's responses on the effects of the ethnic conflict.**

Here I would like to specifically unfold some of the work the Commission have been doing so far.

**Baseline Data**

The Commission had developed a baseline date for future directives through data collection taking in the three dioceses (Malaiata, Central Melanesia and Central Solomons) in mid 2008, 2009 to mid 2010. The data collection was primarily to identify the issues of resettlement, traumatised victims and outstanding reconciliations. This mission was integrated with healing component and evangelism bringing hope to those living in despair. Although the work is still pending for print, the Commission has already made responses to it.

### **Skills the Commission needs to learn**

As the Commission was beginning to respond to these needs it has also realised that there are certain skills which it needs in order it becomes effective in dealing with conflicts. For example:

***Trauma Counselling*** – Some training has been done in trauma counselling, however, the Commission **needs to pursue this more vigorously because people are still suffering from the trauma of the crisis, especially those who have lost loved ones and properties.**

***General basic counselling*** is still needed to help people to overcome their past hurts. Lay people must be encouraged to train in skills of basic counselling to support clergy efforts.

***Conflict problem solving skills*** is also very important, because it helps people to reach their own solutions thereby minimising corruption and reducing tension which can further exacerbate violence if left unchecked.

***Listening Skills*** – is very important in a post conflict situation which the Commission has come to realise. Some training has been done in this area. However, the church needs to put more emphasis to it for the purpose of effective counselling (that is the counsellor better understands his/her client & client feels being heard and understood).

In light of these needs, the Commission since last year and this year has encouraged training for some of its facilitators both in the local context and also within the region. This was made possible through the UND Peace Consultation and also Conflict Resolution Trainings and attachment through God's Pacific People (GPP) and Pacific Centre for Peace (PCP) in Suva, Fiji.

### **4. Mediation, Healing and Reconciliation**

Since its establishment, the Commission was and continue to carry out mediation, healing and reconciliation to both perpetrators and victims of the past ethnic conflict within the identified dioceses. A recent reconciliation organised by the Commission took place in Buma in Maliata diocese. This was a conflict which was further deepened by the ethnic conflict and lasted more than three decades.

The methodology which the Commission applies in mediation, healing and reconciliation is an integration of traditional skills, spiritual and new skills from external sources.

Spiritual input in mediation, healing and reconciliation is significantly important, because in biblical context conflict is not natural but it is the work of the devil. Traditional or cultural skills are important in peacebuilding, because relationships that involve in the conflict and the context of the conflict are important consideration in conflict resolution. External skills or knowledge in conflict resolution and transformation are given equal respect by the Commission, given the psychological effects of the conflict.

## 5. Campaign against Violence

Violence is seen by the Commission as the product of conflict. In the campaign against violence, the Commission encourages peace education to youths in the parishes. Currently the Commission is negotiating with the Education Secretary of ACOM to introduce peace education in the church's secondary schools.

## 6. Proposed Peacebuilding Centre

The Centre is to provide continues training in peace-building in the region. Courses on conflict analysis to identify the root causes of conflicts, mediation, dialogue, conflict transformation, restorative justice, trauma healing, none violence, male advocacy, gender balance and Human Rights will be specifically designed and taught to participants who aspire peace and social development activities eventuating in critical environments in the country.

The second purpose of the centre is to provide continues services needed for healing and reconciliation to take place. It will also become a resource centre for peace and development. These peacebuilding processes are trauma healing and pastoral and professional counseling and reconciliation.

As a resource Centre it will be the space for expressive arts, peace conferences, retreats, networking and recreation activities to enhance healing and transformation.

## 7. Curriculum Development

Currently, the Commission is working on peace curriculum to be used in peace training for the whole church. The curriculum framework has already completed, hence work on lesson format will begin next year.

## 8. Barriers Encountered and Strategies developed to address such difficulties

### *a. Finance.*

**The area of finance is a big concern because without finance we cannot achieve our goals.** The geographical setting of the country makes travel very expensive with inadequate shipping, unreliable plane schedules and dangerous sea travel by canoe.

### *b. Inadequate Logistics*

With inadequate logistics it was a real test trying to reach the people in their respective communities or settlements. Hiring of local canoes and engines, road vehicles quickly eroded the budget. The Commission can only respond effectively to justice, reconciliation and peace issues if it is adequately resourced.

### **What is the solution to this?**

Finding solution to these barriers remains a challenge for both ACOM and the Commission. Currently, the church emphasizes training, especially in stewardship as an immediate action to try and minimise such difficulty. She believes that training in different areas encourages people to become more responsible.

## **6. The spirituality that sustained the church in undertaking its mission.**

The strength of the Commission or ACOM in general in undertaking its ministry of healing and reconciliation is prayer. Amidst fear and uncertainty, the church did not cease to pray.

ACOM believes that the church has spiritual authority to deal with any human situations including the ethnic tensions. History of Christianity in the Pacific involved conflicts and 'bloodsheds' but had ended in victory through divine power. Throughout decades churches had been called upon in settling problems and conflicts in the communities.

And so there was a strong sense of faith that ACOM has prophetic role in the ethnic conflict regardless of whether those in conflict would listen or not.

She believes in ultimate justice and those responsible would still respond to it.

And so there was a strong confidence in God which had motivated or inspired ACOM and other churches to a deep and disciplined prayerfulness.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the ethnic tensions in Solomon Islands came as a shock to all churches in Solomon Islands.

However, member churches in the country through umbrella body, SICA, have realised that no one denomination can alone shoulder the aftermath of the ethnic tension.

It requires collaborative efforts. Recognising that all have been caught unprepared, each denomination has taken separate initiative to address the situation in the country.

The ACOM made an immediate response through the Religious Orders led by the members of Melanesian Brotherhood and later the Mothers Union members.

Such intervention had reawaken ACOM to get more organised in dealing with the situation with prayerfulness and commitment in the ministry of healing and reconciliation.

This has led to wider community appreciation of the role played by ACOM and generates more understanding and respect for the work of reconciliation and peace undertaken by churches in conflict situation.