

# Blessed Are the Peacemakers

Mediation and Reconciliation Skills  
for the Church



THE  
LUTHERAN  
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of Churches



# Blessed Are the Peacemakers

*Mediation and Reconciliation Skills for the Church*

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# Introduction

It is with gratitude and joy, a way of celebration, that I share the present document. It resulted from a journey with The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) member churches in Latin America and the Caribbean and, in recent years, in North America.

My call to serve as LWF Regional Secretary included visits to member churches, during which my attention was often drawn to human dynamics. Interactions between and among people working in the church do not always contribute in a peaceful and natural way, to live Christian discipleship and the call to be salt and light in the world. Our human condition, still broken and affected by circumstances of historical wounds, adds to disagreements and misunderstandings that sometimes obscure the meaning of living the good news of the gospel.

The vulnerability and fear to open up and maintain relationships or dialogues with people who are completely different—not only from each other but also in the way they think— is present at all levels of society. However, to be different is a gift and each person has the opportunity to grow and learn in order to find strength in unity and contribute to that wonderful mission of God that Jesus Christ developed crossing geographical, cultural and even religious borders.

In a world with increasing violence, loss, pain and loneliness, churches retain their relevance spaces for healing. God has spoken and continues to speak through the living word. Dialogue is a gift that allows the divine presence to move people or groups living in conflict situations toward a search for a new start. The document *Blessed Are the Peacemakers – Mediation and Reconciliation Skills for the Church* was developed by a group of people inspired by the search for peace. They have participated in trainings using the “Dialogue for Peaceful Change” tool.

This document offers churches practical approaches to dialogue for mutual change. In the first article, the author focuses on how the divine initiative to reconcile the world can be seen as an invitation to live in daily renewal. The second article explores how the word of God inspires every person, through the potential of their gifts to be leaders, to make use of empathic and mediative communication, preventing conflicts and inspiring equity and inclusion.

Acknowledging the contexts of radicalization that we live in today, the third article focuses on politics and dialogue to promote peace in cities (everywhere) and offers motivation to initiate and nurture actions that unite

people and bring vitality. In contexts of continuous migration, the third article speaks of the church as a mediative presence in conflict mitigation. The fourth article invites church members to actions of faith that are rooted in Christian responsibility, and to the potential for openness hospitality and welcome in spite of one's individual fear. This includes the imperative to open our eyes to the threats of life to the planet that welcomes us. The fifth article highlights the ecological crisis and human relationships, with creation inviting inhabitants of the earth to rethink their habits, needs and consumption systems.

We are grateful to Colin Craig and Jaap Van der Sar, our tutors on Dialogue for Peaceful Change, for allowing us to enhance shared learning. Gratitude also goes to everyone who has nurtured this journey that I have traveled through mediating, listening, praying, writing, or in silence. Thank you too for making it possible to have human resources on the subject of change-conducive dialogue that is linked to the LWF-supported Sustainability Institute (InS) in São Leopoldo, Brazil.

*Patricia Cuyatti*



# Reconciling the World – Contributions of Reconciliation Theology to Conflict Management

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## **Introduction**

Historically religions have been associated with the causes of conflicts. There are quite a few examples demonstrating that in fact religions have given rise to or aggravated disagreements between social groups or persons. In fact, this perception and analysis led Hans Küng to conclude in his project for a world ethics, that there will be no peace in the world if there is no peace between religions.<sup>1</sup>

In speeches made on two occasions (1998 and 2001), Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, attributed to religions a greater role than ever before in the resolution of conflicts. Although he acknowledged that religions were at the root of many conflicts, he suggested that they could offer common principles and values and be a “source of spiritual motivation” for the prevention and/or resolution of conflicts. In

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Küng, *Projeto de ética mundial: Uma moral ecumênica em vista da sobrevivência humana*, 1993, p. 186.

his view, they are a fountain of resources, particularly for the final stage of the dynamics of conflicts, namely, the search for reconciliation.

The purpose of this reflection consists in—starting from an analysis of the notion of reconciliation—highlighting some contributions of Christian theology to forms of peaceful dialogue that may produce changes at the personal, social and cosmic level. At first, the Christian contribution obviously has a motivating and normative value for those who profess Christianity. However, religions and religious leaders share a certain moral authority in the search for solutions in situations of conflict. We will also try to indicate the potential for more general contributions of Christian theology to reconciliation processes.

## **The issue of reconciliation as a theological problem**

St Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) in his work *Why did God become human?*<sup>2</sup> established an approach to incarnation and salvation that became a reference in Christian theology. It was based on the view of Christ's death as an atoning sacrifice for human beings (1 Cor 15:3; Gal 1:40). Thus, the theme of atonement—it is necessary to pay a penalty, suffer a punishment or repair a fault, a sin—was put at the heart of the idea of reconciliation. For reconciliation to be possible, it was necessary that the fault be compensated or repaired in some way.

This approach was centered on the work of Christ, more specifically his death for human redemption. In more technical terms, one may say that atonement deals with the act or process through which estrangement from God, human alienation, is overcome by means of the death of a sacrificial victim.<sup>2</sup> Christ's violent death is taken as a propitiatory action ("satisfaction") that appeases divine wrath and a sacrifice that expiates human sins.

The long permanence and centrality of this idea of atonement in Christian theology left its marks. One should particularly highlight the individual character of salvation that atonement attaches to Christian theology of reconciliation. In recent years, however, the emphasis has been shifted to the social dimension of reconciliation. As a consequence, attention became focused on conflicts between persons and groups and the resources, such as forgiveness, that reconciliation may provide. But the theme of atonement in Christian theology has remained in the shadow and there has been little effort to link it with social reconciliation.

The challenge in dealing today with the topic of reconciliation lies in retrieving the individual meaning of atonement—each person's relation-

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<sup>2</sup> G. Harkness, *The ministry of reconciliation*, 1971, pp. 8, 20, 21.

ship with God—without giving in to the language excessively marked by violence that surrounds this approach. It is necessary to recover the affirmative and profound meaning of expiation in Christ’s sacrificial death, since it has played such a significant role in the Bible and in the theological approaches that have predominated until recent days. Furthermore, it is necessary to establish the actual connection between expiation in spiritual terms and social expiation—restoration of the social order harmed by fault, by sin. Both are inextricably linked and are complementary.

Another aspect has also become an object of reflection on reconciliation. Does it only concern humankind? A recently published study brings very incisive data corroborating the already disseminated use of the word “Anthropocene”<sup>3</sup> to define the present time.<sup>4</sup> The calculation made by those responsible for this research estimates that the level of consumption of energy in the past 70 years is more than 50 percent higher than the energy consumption during all of the previous period, the Holocene, which is assumed to have started with the last glacial period, more than 10,000 years ago.

These data show that humankind has become a geological force capable of profoundly altering environmental systems and the dynamics of life on the planet. In a sense, one can say that humankind lives in an open conflict with nature. This conflict too must be resolved and requires reconciliation. Thus, individual and social reconciliation can be complemented by the urgency of putting an end to the hostility between human beings and nature and the subsequent tackling of the issue of cosmic reconciliation.

## **Biblical background of the term “reconciliation”**

Let us first examine the Bible text. This is not an exhaustive approach. Our intention is simply to investigate the possibility of analyzing some biblical indications about reconciliation in the search for insights that might help us in dealing with the issues raised above.

Considering that reconciliation is the possibility to overcome the marks left by conflicts that have been triggered off, we will consider in this approach three biblical dimensions of reconciliation: *between God*

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<sup>3</sup> This term was proposed by the Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen.

<sup>4</sup> J. Syvitski, C. N. Waters, J. Day et al., “Extraordinary human energy consumption and resultant geological impacts beginning around 1950 CE initiated the proposed Anthropocene Epoch,” *Communications Earth & Environment*, California, 32/32 (2020) 1-13. Retrieved from <https://www.nature.com/articles/s43247-020-00029-y#citeas> on Nov. 11, 2020.

*and human being, between people in society, and reconciliation with the whole of creation.* All these dimensions involve the basic conflicts: between God and human being, between individuals and groups, and between humankind and the whole of creation.

## **Reconciliation between God and human being**

Common sense has crystalized the idea that the Old Testament God is the God of law, judgment, wrath and revenge. The loving God is taken to be a late construction, in an effort by the later social prophets (Hos 11:1-4). However, this view does not do justice to the Old Testament message. It would be more adequate to say that God's judgment and love are so connected that even God's just indignation, God's condemnation of sin, is a fruit of God's love. Thus, it makes no sense to claim that God's wrath must be placated. What must be overcome is rather people's estrangement caused by their unfaithfulness.<sup>5</sup>

Stories like those about Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark and the Tower of Babel show the human distancing from God and despite everything, how love and mercy prevailed. In the midst of God's disgust at human sin shines the opportunity for reconciliation. The ritualistic forms taken by the expression of atonement indicate a deepening of the consciousness of sin and of the need to make reparation (Lev 6:30; 8:15; 16:18,20). Breaking the covenant affected not only the people but also shook the relationship with God. In this context the idea arose that a sacrificial offering should be performed if reconciliation with God was wished.<sup>6</sup> The basic element of sin lies in the absence of faithfulness to the covenant. This break of faithfulness could take on various forms of infraction. However, Jewish religious consciousness was destined to go beyond the idea of expiation as punishment and of ritual sacrifices.<sup>7</sup>

The Psalms begin to reveal that the issue is no longer ritualistic offering, but the person's inner commitment to God (Ps 25:7; 51:1; 130:3, 62:1). The most explicit rejection of the idea of reconciliation with God through

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<sup>5</sup> Harkness, *The ministry of reconciliation*, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Here one should also mention the conception and practice of using a "scapegoat" (Lev 16:20-22) as a way of sending away the sins that assailed society. Werner Schmidt, *A fé no Antigo Testamento*, 2004, p. 209.

<sup>7</sup> Meinrad Limbeck, *Adeus à morte sacrificial*, 2016, pp. 87-88. Nonetheless, it should be stressed that the Old Testament rituals of purification or expiation also played an important role: They kept the people together, reminding them of the covenant and sustaining the sense that reconciliation and forgiveness are necessary.

recourse to external agents can be found in prophethood. There are examples like: Am 5:21-22; Hos 6:6. Without invalidating or disparaging the old covenant, the prophet Jeremiah gives witness to a new covenant that will be written in people's hearts (Jer 31:31-34). In this context we should especially highlight the sharp critique of sacrifices found in Deutero-Isaiah (Is 44:23; 66:3-4). Deutero-Isaiah's theology unifies God's (creative) power and God's (redeeming) love to banish fear and the feeling of separation (Is 54:4-5).<sup>8</sup>

In the New Testament, particularly in the Synoptic Gospels, the topic of reconciliation and forgiveness became central based on Jesus' ministry. The Gospels present Jesus as the one who came to announce the good news of salvation (Mt 4:23-25; Lk 4:16-24; Jn 5:19-24), that is to say, he made the will of God, who does not want the sinner's downfall, a present reality (Lk 7:36-50; 18:9-14). The relationship between God and human being is described as "separation" and "enmity". Jesus is the one whose death restores the relationship between God and humankind (Jn 17:21-23; Rom 5:10-11; Col 1:21-23; Eph 2:13-18).

In Paul, we find the most extensive treatment of the topic of reconciliation. For him, God reconciles human beings with Godself through Jesus' cross, death and blood. His death and blood have the value of a propitiatory sacrifice, since they destroy sin and enmity between God and human being (Rom 5:10,11; 2 Cor 5:8,19,21; Eph 2:16; Col 1:22). It is evident that God does not ask for sacrifice, but performs it Godself. Therefore, the foundation of reconciliation rests on God's action. It is God's exclusive work that transforms the situation of human beings, enabling them to subsist before God. In Christ, God bore the fiercest opposition to God's love, suffering the consequences of sin, and offers sinners participation in God's justice.<sup>9</sup>

## **Reconciliation between human beings**

Reconciliation between individuals and between groups is discussed in three different literary genres in the Old Testament: narratives of reconciliation between individuals, legal codes and words of wisdom.

Let us take as an example two classic stories of reconciliation between persons: between Jacob and Esau (Gen 32-35) and between David and Saul (1 Sam 24). These and other narratives have a clear standard of behavior.

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<sup>8</sup> Schmidt, *A fé no Antigo Testamento*, pp. 210-216.

<sup>9</sup> R. Feldmeier and H. Spieckermann, *O Deus dos vivos: Uma doutrina bíblica de Deus*, 2015, pp. 323-351.

Thus, God's action was not restricted to cultic rituals but was present in the field, on the street and even in contexts of war. These narratives contain memories of reconciliation practices of a social dynamics that took place in families, clans, village communities and in Israel's tribal experience.<sup>10</sup>

Ordinary forces of social change, particularly the consolidation of sedentarism in Israel's life, led to the emergence of moral codes incorporated in laws prescribed for group relationships. We find the result of this in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20), the Covenant Code (Ex 20:22-23,33), the Deuteronomic Code (Dt 12-26) and the Holiness Code (Lev 19).

Although in these codes we find the "law of talion", they also contain determinations of cities of refuge, a distinction between deliberate and accidental injury, between crime and offense due to error or ignorance, protection of foreigners and slaves. These prescriptions have more to do with social justice, which is a vital ingredient in a society where reconciliation can prevail. If this ingredient is lacking, society may submerge in hostility and fights.<sup>11</sup>

The words found in Proverbs (15:1; 17:14; 22:10; 21:19) indicate a kind of prudential wisdom originated in the observation of human nature and of people's responses. The notion of peace/shalom emerges from this wisdom. It is directly linked with justice. There is no peace without the establishment of justice. However, peace has the broad meaning of living in peace with nature, with oneself, with neighbors and with God. In such an inclusive view, the meaning of peace/shalom is very close to that of reconciliation.

In the New Testament the topic of reconciliation between individuals and groups is influenced by views inherited from Old Testament theology and theological conceptions based on the Christ event. There is an exemplary encounter of old and new views in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5). In this passage, the old practices in interpersonal relationships are contrasted with Christ's teaching that deepens them.

Jesus radicalizes these practices by arguing that any kind of damage to persons (hate, slander or physical harm) is liable to divine judgment. In this case, to try to be reconciled to this person is more important than any ritual sacrifice (Mt 5:21-25). Certainly, the most instigating aspect in this approach is the extension of the love of neighbor to the love of enemy (Mt 5:43-48). It is not possible to love the enemy without overcoming the reason of enmity, i.e., without reconciliation.

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<sup>10</sup> Erhard Gerstenberger, *Teologias no Antigo Testamento*, 2007; Hans Jochen Boecker, *Orientação para a vida: Direito e lei no Antigo Testamento*, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Harkness, *The ministry of reconciliation*, p. 32.

The proposal of forgiveness lies at the core of the radicalization in the forms of relationship with people. In this case, Jesus answers a very practical question: How often should we forgive the neighbor who did something against us? Jesus claims that forgiveness has no limits (Mt 18:21-22). The symbolic use of multiples of seven in the text points to the idea of perfection. Thus, the topic of love of neighbor and love of enemy is a duty: perfection is recommended because God is perfect (Mt 5:48).

The foundation of this radicalization is in Christ. His death as self-giving is the definitive overcoming of sin. This event reconciles God and humankind. This reconciliation, however, enables human beings to take part in divine righteousness in this world. Each person is called to share in the “sufferings of God in the world.” It is necessary to take on responsibility for the harm caused in interpersonal relationships, for those “who are in Christ are a new creation” and “no longer live for themselves” (2 Cor 5:15,17). The reconciliation achieved in Christ must be translated into reconciliation in the world as a human responsibility for loving neighbors and those people who are our enemies, without limits.

## **Cosmic reconciliation: The totality of creation**

The most promising idea that relates reconciliation with the totality of creation in the Old Testament is the idea of a sabbatical period (Gen 2:3; Ex 20:11; Dt. 5:14-15). It should be noted that the creation story does not culminate in the creation of the human being but in the day of rest (Gen 2:1-3). In the Old Testament’s faith experience, the idea and practice of rest were expanded to a “sabbatical year” (Ex 23:10,11; Lev 25:1-7) and also to a “jubilee year” (Lev 25:8-34). The idea of a period of rest for everyone and everything sounds like a generous form of reconciliation between people and the world created by God. It is possible to argue for a right of the whole of creation. The right of one, namely, the human being, cannot override, without conflict and violence, the rights of the whole creation. The Sabbath can be understood as a form of reconciliation. Perhaps this explains in part its recurrence and extensive regulation that we find in the Bible.

Another promising approach is found in the theology of the apostle Paul. To the “anguish” current among people over misrule and chaos in the “celestial powers” (Rom 8:38; Eph 6:12; Col 1:13,16) he responds with a reflection that we may call reconciliation of creation. It surfaces clearly in Romans 8:18-25. Here it is plainly evident that salvation in Christ is not restricted to persons, but concerns the totality of creation (Rom 8:21-23). The foundation for this is provided by the view that everything

was created through Christ (Col 1:15-20), and through him “all things” are reconciled (Col 1:20). The human being, who has already received the “first fruits of the Spirit” (Rom 8:23), and become empowered to experience reconciliation (Rom 8:26-30) is called to be the “vanguard” of this “new creation.” As Paul puts it explicitly, we have received the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:19).

## Summary

The biblical approach sketched above allows the conclusion that love and mercy express God’s essential dimension (Ex 34:6-7; Job 2:13; Ps 103:8). God loves and has pity on God’s creation. It is not necessary for something to occur in order to change God’s favorable disposition. Thus, the foundation of forgiveness is in God Godself. God does not need reconciliation, but human beings and the totality of creation do.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, what reconciliation as an exclusive work of God in Christ changes is the situation of human beings and creation by transforming distance into proximity and enmity into friendship.<sup>13</sup> This does not imply that God is indifferent. As Paul puts it, God “was in Christ” and suffers the drama of human reconciliation and profoundly experiences the rejection of God’s offer of love expressed in the cross.

Therefore, sacrificial death is not the dominant biblical idea of atonement. Throughout the New Testament, expiation has the meaning of reconciliation with the removal of barriers between human beings and God, barriers built by human beings themselves due to sin and out of indifference to God’s call. Furthermore, one must say that in the biblical context, expiation does not have the meaning it has acquired in dictionaries and theological handbooks. The Old Testament has an objective view of sin. The latter is the entrance door of evil into human society. It is like an illness that spreads out as a principle of destruction in society’s body, triggering off a series of destructive consequences.

Consequently, in the biblical tradition there is no room for a view of reconciliation that might “cheapen” God’s mercy and grace. Concerning reconciliation between humankind and the totality of creation, the decisive element is already given in God’s exclusive work in Christ. Christ’s self-giving is a precious “gift” of divine righteousness that enables the new life of lost humankind and fallen creation. In Christ, God restores life and fellowship with God to human being and creation. Humankind reconciled in Christ shares in the sufferings of God’s work of reconciliation in this world (2

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.



Cor 4:10). As “new creatures”, reborn in Christ, human beings live from received forgiveness and give real witness by promoting reconciliation. At the core of this witness lies forgiveness to be lived as love even toward those who are hostile to it. Since all things were created and reconciled through him (Col 1:15-16, 20), there is no reconciliation that is not also reconciliation-shalom between humankind and the whole of creation.

## **The development of the concept of reconciliation in theology**

During Scholasticism, the topic of reconciliation, so forcefully put forward by Paul, was put at the margin by Western theology. Very early, theological reflections focused more on the mode of redemption than on its purpose. For this reason, the notions of merit and satisfaction dominated reflection for a long time.

The medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) devoted one article of his *Summa Theologica* to the topic but restricted his approach to the topic of sacrifice. It was precisely his theological opponent Duns Scotus (1266-1308) who valued reconciliation. He returned to Paul's texts and saw in reconciliation the recapitulation of humankind and of the whole universe.

In the realm of Roman Catholicism, the topic of reconciliation was very early reserved for the sacrament of penance. It was then connected to the practice of reconciliation of sinners with God and the church through public and private confession and penance. Reconciliation became a technical and legal term of sacramental jargon. The Second Vatican Council pointed to a different direction, but this cannot be explored here.

Because of its theological focus that stressed the principle of divine initiative, the Reformation might have put more emphasis on reconciliation. However, the more nuanced position of Melancthon prevailed, which, still in consonance with Scholastic theology, highlighted human action. Later, more heterodox Protestant theologians elaborated on the topic and emphasized the precedence of divine initiative in the concept of reconciliation.

In 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, Protestant theology the topic of reconciliation was taken up again. The progress of biblical theology, particularly regarding Pauline theology, and the emergence of modernity with its peculiar challenges put the topic on the agenda again. Here are some Protestant theologians who gave a contribution to this resumption: James Denney (*The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, 1917), John Oman (*Grace and Personality* 1917) and Donald Baillie, who wrote the well-known book *God Was in Christ* (1948).

In the classic work *The Faith of the Christian Church*, published in 1923, Gustaf Aulén dealt with the topic of reconciliation in the book's second part, "The Act of God in Christ". In this part, the third chapter has the title "The Victorious Act of Reconciliation", and in it Aulén describes divine activity as a triumphant and reconciling act of the "Christus Victor". In his view, the essential character of salvation is reconciliation, the restoration of the broken relationship between God and the world as a victory that destroys the power of evil and puts an end to its dominion. Thus, the term reconciliation indicates the nature of salvation.<sup>14</sup>

However, it was Karl Barth who gave the topic of reconciliation a definitive place in Christian theology. He structured his famous *Church Dogmatics* in five parts: The Word of God, God, Creation, Reconciliation and Redemption. So, reconciliation is discussed in the work's fourth part. He assigned this topic such a prominent place because in his view reconciliation is "the fulfilment of the covenant of grace." In reconciliation we are forgiven and justified. Justified persons live now in the trust of becoming children of God in fulness.<sup>15</sup> Agreeing with Barth, Harold Ditmanson argued in his work on the topic of grace (*Grace in Experience and Theology*, 1977) that reconciliation is ultimately the content of grace.

In short, one may say that reconciliation acquired an increasing space in theological approaches. It became evident that it cannot be dissociated from the topic of salvation in Christian theology. In a stricter sense, it renders grace concrete and gives it a content. Exploring this view theologically, one can claim that reconciliation through the death of Christ on the cross represents the end of every "sacrificial" death, be it of a religious or political nature.

Thus, reconciliation has an eschatological meaning, because salvation is not regressive, but projects itself into the future of our experience, pointing out that God, who "was" in Christ, overcame evil by taking it up into Godself. Thus, the violence that surfaces in Christian theology of reconciliation does not emerge from a need to satisfy a god who demands sacrifice, but is inevitable, as it is an expression of all the destructive forces that are opposed to God's reconciling love. Therefore, as Comblin and Sobrino rightly remind us, Christian theology of reconciliation cannot, be no means, be transformed into an ideology that, in an effort to work out

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<sup>14</sup> Gustaf Aulén, *A fé cristã*, 1965, pp. 194-209. [English edition: *The Faith of the Christian Church* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2002, pp. 182-230.)

<sup>15</sup> Harold Ditmanson, *Grace in experience and theology*, 1977, pp. 180-181.

conflicts and promote peaceful coexistence, accommodates injustice and violence, rearranging inequalities without eliminating them.<sup>16</sup>

## The “diakonia” of reconciliation

In the LWF document titled *Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment* published in 2004, reconciliation is seen as one of the three theological dimensions of mission. The way in which the document relates reconciliation to mission follows Paul's statement in 2 Cor 5:18. We have received the “diakonia” of reconciliation to serve people to whom God's grace was rendered to other people, the community, the church, society, the totality of creation by announcing and experiencing the “word of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:19). In the following, some elements of reconciliation as mission are highlighted.

### Sin and guilt from the point of view of forgiveness

The focus on reconciliation enables us to see our sin taking forgiveness as a starting point (Rom 5:20). As Comblin puts it, “... Christian consciousness of sin as part of the consciousness of reconciliation.”<sup>17</sup> This certainty has the capability of removing guilt, since we do not have to surrender to the vicious cycle of error, guilt and suffering. This has a tremendous liberating effect for terrified consciences. However, to avoid turning reconciliation into a cheap offer, we must clearly stress that it is sin that brings death, that divides (*Ubi peccatum, ibi multitudo* – “Where there is sin, there is division), that antagonizes. Sin is not an isolated event but unfolds in the course of history and has its roots in human nature.<sup>18</sup>

### New creatures and forgiveness

Reconciliation does not render us passive. It transforms us into new creatures, new men and women, active and free beings (2 Cor: 5:17). The “diakonia of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18) that proclaims this message turns

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<sup>16</sup> José Comblin, *Teologia da reconciliação: ideologia ou reforço da libertação?*, 1987; Jon Sobrino, “O cristianismo e a reconciliação: caminho para uma utopia,” *Concilium*, Petrópolis, 303 (2003) 82-93.

<sup>17</sup> Comblin, *Teologia da reconciliação*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>18</sup> Sobrino, *O cristianismo e a reconciliação*, p. 84.

it into reality. This word is powerful and has effects, as it creates faith and constitutes persons renewed in faith. Reconciliation is an experience in which we become new creatures, capable of forgiving, capable of asking for forgiveness. There is no future without forgiveness (Desmond Tutu). Here the “diakonia of reconciliation” can explore other topics, such as compassion and care, besides forgiveness.

## **Truth and memory**

When announcing reconciliation, theology does not give up the search for truth. It searches for and announces truth. It is “diakonia” for truth. It can never be complicit with lies that blunt violent human, social and natural processes. Our “diakonia” for truth must turn us into trustworthy people, so that we are able to in fact help to reestablish what happened in violent processes. Telling the truth about the past is essential to achieve a stable and peaceful society in the future. As the saying goes, in a war the first victim is truth. “Diakonia” for truth turns us into guardians of memory.<sup>19</sup> How many times should we forgive? How can we forgive without erasing the memory of the suffering of Christ and of the victims? Does forgiving mean forgetting? To work through the memory of suffering and harm cannot mean that those who inflicted the harm are not held responsible for it.

## **Impunity and justice**

Every form of impunity works against reconciliation. A “diakonia of reconciliation” shall focus its work on the search for justice, which always presupposes truth. There is no reconciliation without establishing the legal procedures that attribute to each person their responsibility for the harm that was inflicted.

## **Reconciliation and liberation**

The people who give witness to reconciliation have the task of creating conditions that make it possible for both victimizers and victimized be liberated from their experience and may experience reconciliation. Both liberation and reconciliation must go hand in hand. Liberation without

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<sup>19</sup> This topic could be further explored considering the vindication of the memory of the defeated (as discussed by Walter Benjamin).

reconciliation is defeatism; reconciliation without liberation is unrealistic and ideological.<sup>20</sup> Both must be implemented in public policies at all levels. Only in this way can the dignity that was taken away be restored and new forms of life together can be achieved.

## **Healing and rituals**

The “diakonia of reconciliation” must learn to explore the whole ritual richness of Christian faith to mark the memory of past reconciliations and indicate new horizons in previously conflictive situations. Rituals of forgiveness and reconciliation are essential; they are channels of healing for a life torn to pieces, for a divided community, for a fragmented people and for raped nature.

## **The fullness of reconciliation**

Reconciliation is not offered just once, at one particular moment. It accompanies the whole course of life as a permanent fountain of renewal and must, therefore, be put into an eschatological perspective. It is a promise of success, of overcoming. It helps to remove the various forms of anguish experienced by human beings and opens up horizons of possibilities. It is a guarantee concerning the final point of life, for we believe that the judgment will be favorable.<sup>21</sup> No sin or no stumbling are unsurpassable barriers. Everything can be overcome. Thus, reconciliation experiences this tension between the eschatological fullness and the practice of reconciliation that is possible.

## **“In the power of the Spirit”: Resources for reconciliation**

Because God reconciled humankind with Godself, God also enabled humans to be God’s witnesses “in the power of the Spirit” (Acts 1:8). God shares God’s power with God’s people so that they carry on God’s mission in the world. The power of the Spirit fulfills the promise that every person who believes in Christ will do what he does. This power is at the service of the communication of reconciliation as God’s unconditional love. The church

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<sup>20</sup> Federação Luterana Mundial, *Missão em contexto: transformação, reconciliação, empoderamento: uma contribuição da FLM para a compreensão e a prática da missão*, 2006, p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> Comblin, *Teologia da reconciliação*, p. 21.

receives this power so that it may serve, rather than take possession of it. The church is not an administrator or distributor of powers but benefits from the power that heals and enriches Christ's body.

Colin Craig, who devoted many years of his life to building peace in Northern Ireland and in many other countries, created the "Iceberg Model" to describe the dynamics a conflict goes through. According to this model, conflict, because of its dynamics, is not always open to the implementation of solutions and the search for reconciliation. It is vital to follow the dynamics so that we may know when and in which way we can act.

No conflict can be kept at a high intensity level for a long time. The physical and psychic energy it demands from people gets exhausted at some point in time and conflict enters a mode of intensity reduction. Grasping this moment and knowing how to direct it is a key strategy to direct conflict toward a resolution through the mediation process. The resolution creates the possibility to install a reconciliation process. Reconciliation, as an opportunity for transformation, belongs to the stakeholders or parties involved; after the possibility of reaching an understanding through trust, empathy and compassion has been created, the parties involved need time to build renewed relationships.

It is evident that reconciliation cannot be reduced to a strategy or a set of resources. It is an attitude toward life, a spirituality. Thus, it has two faces: a social (structures and processes) and a spiritual (reconstruction of broken lives and relationships) one.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, on the basis of a secure spiritual guidance, one can prescribe five steps in a methodological dynamic that enables the parties involved to rebuild relationships:<sup>23</sup>

- Recognition. It begins with an understanding of what reconciliation means in the particular situation, its future shape and the characters involved. Furthermore, taking cultural differences into consideration, it is important to find out what means are most effective in a particular context. Having put these previous questions, the core of recognition is the mutual recognition by the parties by admitting their moral equality, their dignity, their wounds or their responsibilities for causing them. This presupposes searching for the truth: knowing what really happened, the recovery of memory so that the parties involved may re-elaborate their personal biography and collective history. This is a condition to begin the reconciliation process.

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Schreiter, *Ministério da reconciliação: Espiritualidade & estratégias*, 1998, pp. 26, 15.

<sup>23</sup> William Zartman, "O processo de reconciliação social," *Concilium: Revista Internacional de Teologia*, Petrópolis, 303 (2003)103-11; Schreiter, *Ministério da reconciliação*.

- Elimination of the inflicted harm. This is the central element. Everything begins with looking for the other person with the intention of getting reconciled. This process takes place in two steps: First it is necessary that both sides admit their responsibility for the inflicted harm and provide reparation. The request for forgiveness and the response to it follow as the second step. Reparation and forgiveness require each other. Reconciliation cannot become unrequited forgiveness. The additional moment consists in complying with the law, for, if there was violation and excessive violence, there can be no impunity. If possible, it is determinant that the legal system be strengthened to avoid future violations. It is necessary to look for a fair balance between mere revenge or retribution and a simple forgetting of the atrocities inflicted on persons, society and nature.
- Practice of new attitudes. Recognizing and eliminating harm enables the suppression of negative attitudes, but do not automatically create a new attitude. The latter requires an intentional and long transition that works through the memory of wounds and involves the creative gestation of a new culture.
- Establishment of a new common project. New attitudes enable a new common project, the active collaboration in a shared destiny. The consummation of reconciliation consists in the construction of a new common horizon of possibilities.
- Creation of mechanisms for dispute resolution. It is not enough to have new attitudes and a common project. Institutions and norms have to be strengthened and improved to work on solution mechanisms that deal with relapses and with potential future conflicts without reawakening old memories or reopening old scars.





# Leadership and Mediation

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## Introduction

This article has two parts. One connects to the biblical contribution to leadership and the pastoral aspect inspired by the role of God. It brings the Lutheran identity giving basis to affirm leadership in churches at all levels. The second part reflects on the role of leadership in the face of conflict. Using the resource *Dialogue for Peaceful Change*,<sup>1</sup> communication and mediative leadership become resources to prevent conflict from arising. The section encourages educating leaders aiming to affirm equity and inclusion.

## Leadership

The understanding of leadership is relevant because leaders engage in management while guiding the church. Leaders offer direction, promote gifts, empower people, encourage unity, and good relations. Before engaging on the biblical aspects at the base of leadership, one has to see the differences of leadership in church and leadership in society.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Colin, *Navigating Conflict and Change. DPC Handbook Part 1*, 2019.

## Differences between leaders in church and society

According to the Oxford dictionary, leadership is “the action of leading a group of people or an organization.” Let us focus on some distinctive variances in the spheres of church and society.

*In society*, government and private organizations largely focus on the ability of key persons whose capacity (sort of power) inspire social change. In doing so, a leader has to be qualified to fit a position and, at the same time, he/she has to have the energy to maintain the enthusiasm of co-workers. In other words, a leader is a person who manages, directs, and renews the people’s hope while safeguarding the interest of the institution.

Consequently, a leader is committed to the organization and its goals. For instance, he/ she is consistent with the organization’s ethical principles (solidarity, respect, promotion of values, etc.) and maintaining the organization’s interests. In fact, his/her self-realization (personal interest) is reflected in promoting change, which affirms the institution’s goals and values.

*In church*, leadership focuses primarily on God. It means that God is the source and power that inspires and nurtures leadership. People in leadership positions ground their understanding and actions in the relationship sealed by God in baptism. This means that leadership is not an ability alone; it connects to the call and vocation received from God.

Then, leadership is a faithful response to the relation given by God. It conveys trust to the call and trust in service. Trust in God and the community of faith are two aspects related to leadership. To nurture their role, leaders are in continuous learning/education, to cultivate and promote the ethical principles that affirm life and dignity.

## 1. God as source for leadership

Leadership finds its source in God. The connection to God starts at baptism. Through it, as the Book of Concord says, each person becomes a beloved child of God.<sup>2</sup> By God’s grace, the person is pardoned from sins and receives the gifts of the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup> The gifts of the Holy Spirit are put in practice so that people become aware of the gifts they carry and nurture them. For leaders, it also means to know more about the gracious God offering and affirming the ability to lead the church and community of faith. Guidance is a key aspect to cultivate leadership and use gifts that will enhance that aptitude.

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<sup>2</sup> *Book of Concord*, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2000, p. 372§2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* 461§41.

As leadership connects to the gifts offered by God, through the action of the Holy Spirit, 1 Corinthians 12:8-19 helps to make them visible. Fear of God is the fulfilment of trust in faith. People who fear God put God first and follow the spirit of love. This is a bigger framework to help people to overcome selfishness. The fear of God is never an experience that traps or paralyzes a person driving them toward anxiety. It shows imperfections and teaches how to embrace them. Fear of God is an invitation to accept who we are and acknowledge our own limitations.

Another gift is knowledge of God. It brings the ability to be aware of the loving presence of God and to share it. To know God means awareness of the justifying and renewing work on the cross and resurrection, which shows justice in the practical path of love and grace.

Understanding is another gift from the Spirit. It equips people to accept God's justification as an act of justice. We understand that God sees the human condition and acts with compassion, and grace. Salvific work brings awareness of injustices and invites us to embrace justice. For people in leadership positions, it invites them to interact eye-to-eye with humility, and respect.

Leaders seek conscious advice from the gift of wisdom. Wisdom is much more than knowledge; it allows us to learn and read perceptions and insights because they are part of differences that enrich relations between persons. Wise leaders are open and appreciate people's life experiences.

I am sure that most churches, at a certain time, have struggled with people-related issues in leadership. One has to remember that the church is the body of God made up of human beings whose condition is in the process of being shaped by God.

When in situations of struggle or calm, one needs to return Scripture and discern. Reading the scriptures through the lens of love and, together with life experience, can enrich us to face frustration and anger in a different way. Reading them motivates us to see human actions within specific contexts.

In order to harvest different aspects related to leadership, read Proverbs 1:2-7 (RVI).

<sup>2</sup> for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight;

<sup>3</sup> for receiving instruction in prudent behavior, doing what is right and just and fair;

<sup>4</sup> for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young—

<sup>5</sup> let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance—

<sup>6</sup> for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.

<sup>7</sup> The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

After reading, identify why it is relevant to know God. Share key concepts derived from reading and enhance your understanding of God as source for leadership.

## **Leadership and integrity**

Integrity to God is one of the central themes in life. I am sure that you have identified this in your reading and conversation of the Proverbs. Integrity is a characteristic of those who trust in God. As said before, trust is related to faith and it is a gift from God.

Now, you are invited to turn to the story of Job where integrity to God is fundamental. There is no specific passage in the book of Job that points to integrity, rather, a long explanation that connects Job to integrity.

Job belonged to Uz, a southern Arab location and was faithful to God (Job 1:1). In his life, Job modeled honesty and lived out the ethical norms of his time. Job kept good relations with God and neighbor; therefore, he is considered innocent. There is a moment that his integrity and gratitude to God is questioned, “if Job has no possessions and God stops protecting and blessing him, he will be impious” (1:9-11 NIV).

The challenge centers on Job’s faith and gratitude to God versus retribution in the sense of reward. With Job, one discovers that faith never links to actions and consequently to compensation. Faith results from the work of God through the Holy Spirit and it is accepted in gratitude—this is faith.

Faith is never functional. It is given freely. Because God can see Job’s integrity, God declared him innocent affirming that there is no one on earth like him, a man who fears God and avoids evil (Job 2:3). Job has many possessions but they do not grant him security. When Job loses everything, he suffers and regrets his condition. Suffering is never an ideal situation. Through pain and abandonment, Job speaks of his situation (Job 40:5) but remains hopeful. Only then, Job shows that faith is more than rational knowledge; it is awareness of God’s mercy.

Job opens his heart and receives the strength to continue in faith and gratitude to God. This is an example of challenges regarding integrity. It shows the humble and righteous character that inspires truthfulness amid difficulties.

Inspired by this story, share experiences of integrity. Exchange ideas of how to cultivate integrity in the community of faith among leaders.

## Relations and power structures

In this part, we will address the stories of Peter and Martha's confession of faith to Jesus as Lord. You are invited to go a step beyond the confessions and analyze power issues asserting mainly exclusive structures related to leadership.

When Jesus asks, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is? (Matthew 16:13), he does this to educate his disciples. The question, "But who do you say that I am? (v. 16) is a search for the reasons why the disciples are following Jesus. Peter's response was a genuine and faithful answer, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

"Who do you say I am?" is a question related to faith and trust in God whose love and justice was present in Jesus. Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom of God bringing new meaning to the *good news* set up by the Roman Empire. The Emperor seized territories and placed signs with the word "Evangelion" indicating good news of imperial power. Jesus knew that Israel was waiting for a powerful Messiah able to turn down the Roman Empire freeing them from heavy taxes, poverty and discrimination.

Peter's confession recognizes Jesus as God and receives the response: "Good for you, Simon son of John! For this truth did not come to you from any human beings, but it was given to you directly by my Father in heaven. ... And so I tell you Peter: you are the rock, and on this rock foundation I will build my church, and not even death will never be able to overcome it" (Matthew 16:17-18 NIV).

Turning to Martha's confession (John 11:17-27), it is also an affirmation of faith (Christological affirmation). It happens in the context of Lazarus' death. Jesus was on the way to visit Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. Martha hurried to meet Jesus before he arrived in town. She lamented that her brother had died and Jesus comforts her saying, "Your brother will rise to life" (v.23 NIV). Martha knows about the promise of the resurrection and responds asserting that resurrection will happen on the last day (v.24).

Jesus wanted Martha to see God's glory upon believing (v.41) and for the people to believe in him as the Son of God (v.45). Therefore, Jesus reveals his own resurrection and identity. "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and those who live and believe in me will never die" (25-26 NIV). Martha listening to that promise faithfully confesses, "Yes, Lord! she answered. I do believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (v.27 NIV).

Later, when the disciples help to shape the communities of faith, they wrote the Gospels in light of Jesus' ministry. The goal was to continue to educate communities to see Jesus as the promised Messiah and to believe

in him. If the purpose of the confession is to educate the followers' faith, why did Peter's confession become a source for structure and power?

Martha and Peter's confessions are good examples for addressing power dynamics in church, especially relating to leadership. Martha and Peter confess Christ as their Lord, but the scriptures only register Jesus' response to Peter. That response is still used to establish power structures denying women's access to leadership.

Although there is no record of a response to Martha's confession, churches that include women in leadership adapt Jesus' response to Peter and say: "Good for you Martha! For this truth did not come to you from any human being, but it was given to you directly by my Father in heaven... And so I tell you Martha: you are the rock, and on this rock foundation I will build my church, and not even death will ever overcome it."

As God inspired the confessions of Martha and Peter, faith is the basis for becoming the foundational rock. It is by faith, not by person, that Jesus builds the church and gives "the keys of the Kingdom of heaven" equally to men and women.

This is the good news of the Kingdom of God; it promotes just and equitable relationships. These relationships based on faith aim to change, to recognize the image of God in the other. The confession of faith is a living proclamation of fair relationships and a strong statement that God is teaching men and women alike.

Jesus' question, "who do you say I am" never defined doctrines or hierarchies. It connects people to strengthen discipleship. To confess is to renew peer relationships, especially in contexts strongly marked by patriarchal practices. Leaders have to be aware of this invitation.

As mentioned before, leaders use their gifts (competencies and aptitudes) to serve God and others. Please, have a conversation about how to promote equity and empower people to be involved in leadership using the power of love and inclusion.

## **Leadership enlightened by Lutheran identity**

In the Lutheran understanding, all believers are part of the body of Christ. The *priesthood of all believers* is another way to refer to that body. Each person is a priest thanks to the vocation affirmed in her or his baptism. The call of lay and ordained persons is primarily to serve God through different ministries. The ordained ministry responds to a specific call in order to deliver on tasks connected to pastors, deacons, or in some cases catechists. They serve in humility as the lay people do.

The Book of Concord states a principle of participation in the body of Christ as priests (saints), “According to the Scriptures that the church itself is the congregation of the saints, who truly believe the gospel of Christ and have the Holy Spirit.”<sup>4</sup>

People gathered as saints is a strong image to help prevent structural authority that distorts the power of love and justice. It also beneficial in addressing tensions when dealing with authority, in 1 Corinthians ministers, are placed on equal footing and it teaches that the church is above the ministers. That is why he does not attribute to Peter or authority over the church or over other ministers. Because it says “everything is yours: be it Paul, be it Apollos, or be it Cephas.” (1 Cor: 21-22) This means that neither Peter nor the other ministers should assume lordship or authority over the church, nor burden the church with traditions, nor allow someone’s authority to be worth more than the word, nor oppose the authority of Cephas to that of the other apostles.”<sup>5</sup>

There is no lordship or superiority over the church (1 Pet 5:3). This principle gives integrity and guidance to leadership as a gift to many people and for multiple purposes. The concept of the priesthood of all believers sets ground to practice leadership at different levels (different positions in ministries) in the church. The decision-making position is one among others. Leaders in that position learn to appreciate and seek advice from other leaders like administrators or Bible school leaders. Leaders are called to be the hands of God while teaching, counselling, visiting, praying, singing, being in charge of the administration or accounts, etc.

Based on the principle of participation in leadership, Lutheran churches agree that leadership is never for a few people but rather shared among the community of faith. Each person is able to bring gifts to the table and to help shape ideas into concrete actions. A leader brings gifts to contribute and work in God’s mission through preaching of the Word, serving people (diakonia), or being active in public spaces to advocate and influence change. The priesthood of all believers sets the identity of inclusive churches where men, women, and youth nurture each other in their leadership.

However, one must be aware that patriarchal practices still prevail in society and church. In these types of environments, leaders help overcome the scrutiny and continued performance review of women and young male leaders. Leadership that supports women and young leaders is optimizing their engagement in the values of the church. When leadership is shared, women and men stay in charge of spiritual or administrative tasks while

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid 156§28

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 334§11

affirming legal representation among women or young leaders as a way of educating society.

Again, start a conversation and examine what is needed to promote equality in leadership. Pay special attention to the dynamics when women and young people are in leadership positions and how the principle of participation can heal and empower you to live in equity.

## **2. Leadership in the face of conflict and change**

The history of churches belongs to a larger narrative. In it, people come to know about reconciliation by faith, a gracious gift offered in Christ. Centuries after the disciples of Jesus formed communities of faith, the church was organized. In the early centuries, it faced ruptures and later reforms. As God initiates and sustains the church through time, there are different churches present in distinct contexts. The roles of leaders in the church are central to the renewal of relations.

### **Leadership and assertive communication**

Communication is a tool that helps to know information and, at the same time, to be aware of dynamics between relationships. Due to technological advances, communication is fast and helps to reach others in different places. It also can be a threat, especially when used to spread information when situations become strained. For the last aspect, face-to-face communication helps to address sensitive issues, clarify misunderstandings, to know how people are feeling, and to work through them.

Leaders at different levels in the churches from their respective positions are invited to consider these aspects just mentioned and think how communications can help or worsen situations from your leadership positions in decision making: as teachers, deacons, administrators, pastors, etc. Leaders are called to enrich ministry in churches, and the communication tool is important for preaching the gospel, serving and seeking justice.

Conversation skills require constant practice when working with individuals and groups. Dialogue can strengthen and support what a letter or email conveys. Leaders need to set time for one-on-one conversations regarding tasks, relationships, or debriefings. Communication is both, the message given as well as the interpretation of codes that can involve body language, feelings, emotions, etc. Communication is a gift for better understanding what people do and how they are engaged in relationships.



Good communication helps people in their convictions and belonging to the community of faith. Belonging means having a role in the church. When the church is aware of the relevance of roles, it invests to engage different people as a network. In these assignments, communication will help information sharing, explaining codes used in church (while working in the community), and invite people to exercise their kindness, translating their faith through actions in which it is grounded.

Leaders learn the relevance of good communication. Delivering well-prepared messages and information (in written or spoken forms), they have to be *sensitive communicators*, which implies a deep sense of listening beyond words. This requires an intentional presence to be able to understand messages, to search for explanations, to ask questions that call for deeper reflection. These tools not only help to understand others, they also prepare leaders to communicate while making sense of the context and while thinking of people in their congregation and community.

Practicing these skills leads to sensible communication paying attention to underlying dynamics. Interpreting between the lines requires a close relationship with people in their own setting. There is cultural and sub-cultural knowledge that requires translation. Leaders are in good positions to link people in an inclusive manner. When difficulties arise, going to the source of information, instead of relying on third-party information, helps deepen their understanding and finding facts. In this way, listening to the two parties in a non-confrontational way helps to recognize knots that make the relationship impossible.

Sub-cultures bring many communication codes. They can be navigated by reading and making sense of ways to engage and interact. Through constant communication, leaders come to understand these ways of expressions that search for the broader meaning of life of that which is expressed. It requires extra work but it helps to avoid engaging in selective communication that is mostly covered by emotions.

Communication becomes a good tool when it is well timed. It gives the opportunity to engage with people and to renew understanding before emotions and tensions escalate into a crisis. In other words, communication is a crisis prevention tool.

Today, there are different social media applications. On the one hand, they are a gift because they help to quickly connect people around the world. On the other hand, they can be dangerous when used wrongly. The misuse of social media has challenged various groups and churches; therefore, the recommendation is to develop a communications' code of conduct. Specific procedures will help setting lines of communication (internally and externally) and identify key persons to help use the applications well.

All the aspects above are relevant to skills on sensitive communication. Now, turning to Scriptures, we find God speaking in different times and through different forms. God sent messages through prophets, Jesus Christ, the disciples and other people. God wanted us to know of God's love that affirms life. It also meant to recognize God in respect and to offer praise through actions of love to the neighbor.

As God continues to communicate through the churches, communication remains relevant. That is the reason why leadership entails "self-discipline, a profound level of concentration, commitment, and multitasking."<sup>6</sup> All these are certainly gifts.

Let us remember that face-to-face conversations are beneficial. This recommendation is taken from Matthew 18:15-16 and can help to clarify uneasy situations, to overcome misunderstandings or assumptions, and search for renewal or to set up bridges.

Remembering that difficult situations are opportunities to help one another, read Matthew 18:15-16 and open conversations to reflect on how to improve leadership skills. Please, read it, think of a specific case, identify the dynamics, and share the learning.

## **Mediative leadership**

The experience of mediation becomes relevant to leadership. Nevertheless, a leader in church (whatever her or his position) has to remember that she or he is not a mediator. Their role as leader can help to prevent any circumstance from turning into a crisis.

That is the reason why leaders, in this article, are invited to know their place and be aware that their engagement is mainly to prevent situations that can potentially lead to conflicts. Then, the leader will become a bridge between the people and help them to acknowledge difficulties; but the mediator is never her / his role. Mediation needs to be a resource from outside of the church with extensive qualifications—knowledge and experience.

One of the gifts for leaders is to know their place: where they belong as part of the church or congregation. As such, they can allow dialogue, becoming the connection for understanding. When the situation becomes unbearable; their role is to look for professional support.

Leaders will face situations that do not go well and emotions will arise adding to physical tiredness, anger, frustration, etc. These signs already require care. In Psalm 91:1-7, the presence of God in a difficult situation

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<sup>6</sup> Craig Colin, *Navigating Conflict and Change*, p. 92.

is confirmed. Psalm 91 offers two images: the protector and the open wings of a mother hen.

As protector, God is the shelter that provides shade and refuge (safe space). In God, people can breathe again and can recover their serenity. As the mother hen with open wings, God presents a careful figure that welcomes and protects from rain or cold nights. Both images are significant because they affirm care, which is a characteristic of the church. Therefore, love and care remain relevant even in difficult moments.

If you have not heard of “mediative leadership” before, it is more than a description. Mediative leadership refers to skilled persons (knowledgeable and gifted) with the willingness to lead (predisposition for personal involvement) while carefully listening to all parties involved. When a person realizes her/his limits, she/he will seek a professional mediator.

Mediative leadership invites *emphatic listening* in the sense of care. It helps to promote peace, which can open hearts and lead to reconciliation. Please note that reconciliation is God’s work (Romans 5:11). Leaders set up safe spaces where people can connect again (see their faces and eyes), and can move to restart their relations.

Paying attention to underlying forces in relationships will lead to uncovering levels of difficulties. The leader supports by observing these dynamics and encouraging the parties to become aware of them. When addressing difficult situations, leaders have to give equal attention to both parties involved.

People who listen to each other are confident and more open to seeing one another’s perspective and identifying the dynamics. After assessing, evaluating, and arriving at a conclusion, leaders can bring the parties together for dialogue. This time can help to clarify positions and overcome assumptions.

Let us remember that listening to a person directly (firsthand) helps simplifying the experience, identify and understand feelings and, when possible, it serves as a force to inspire the parties to find a way out of the situation together.

Leaders are generally entrusted to represent and deliver specific tasks. In doing so, they serve God and, at the same time, work for the unity of the church (John 17: 20-21). This enormous responsibility adds to the awareness of sensitivities, disagreements, different life experiences, and positions among people. Thus, by making the best use of empathic listening and communication, leaders fulfil their call.

At all times, leaders have to activate the prevention tool anticipating situations that may fuel and turn into a crisis. Mediative leaders are compassionate (empathetic) taking time to encourage people in uneasy relationships to take a step toward new beginnings. When listening to

frustrations and anger, leaders are emphatic without taking these feelings as their own; it means keeping a healthy distance while being present. Mediative leadership is an intentional task that affirms care and healing.

As said before, when the situation does not reach a level of understanding, even by clarifying positions; it is a sign to search for a professional mediator. Seeking for a professional support is another gift in leadership.

Read Psalm 91:1-7, think of a situation that needs (or needed) a warm and kind presence. How the leader acted and, if things went in the wrong direction, what was needed? Share the learning to help leaders see the work of God through leadership.

## **Leadership that empowers leaders**

Leadership in the sense of guidance has its source in the vocation given in baptism. Yet, it is true all people at different levels of leadership need to promote and educate leaders. One of the challenging aspects that remains crucial is “leadership of equals.” It involves the inclusion of different people to help overcome top-down practices. This is especially evident in structures where people face unequal positions and relations.

As human beings, we have not yet reached a church of equals in the sense of being non-hierarchical. However, leaders that uphold their baptismal call know that in in God’s mission, men, women, young people and various actors are invited to preach, to serve, to advocate and develop equally.

Warning leaders about this reality helps them to intentionally empower many people who can embrace their call and affirm their gifts. There is still need to pay special attention to the gifts of women from indigenous and African descent, as well as gifts of young leaders.

As everyone brings their life experiences and knowledge (as asserted by Paulo Freire), empowerment, in addition to the recognition of gifts, is the affirmation of each person being as integral and important. They can be motivated and given opportunities in order to flourish while working and learning. When these aspects are in place, ownership and belonging already affirm inclusion and participation.

Churches that strongly invest in inclusion and participation are aware of patriarchal influences that will be always present in society. Consciousness functions as a leadership asset to continue decolonizing obstructive practices that remain even among those who know them. Leaders focus on different life stories to strengthen a church full of talents. These gifts are inspiring and have the potential to be a refuge for many others in society.

The priesthood of all believers, central to Lutherans, targets hierarchy and power. The reformers had that intention when they developed and expanded this concept. In Acts 23:1-5, the “high priest” administers the law through example instead of looking for guilt or dismissing people. Earlier, it was explored how leadership is for everyone and is carried out collegially (along with other people). God continues to invite leaders to renew relationships, appreciation of differences, to move beyond dualities, and to reconnect people amidst differences.

One of the challenges everyone faces, and especially people in leadership positions, is the desire to become like God; in fact, this is the temptation of Eden. Acknowledging this temptation is an enormous step in bringing leaders to someone else’s level, to affirm their call as servants to God and neighbor. Humility and awareness of human nature help to return to the source of reconciliation in the baptismal event. When leaders are admired because they perform their work well, it should not distort that baptismal seal because it prevents us from not giving in to pride and arrogance.

The church has the duty to serve with love. Leaders have to keep this horizon knowing that their call to serve (like being enslaved) is part of their responsibility. To uphold the baptismal vocation is not easy. It requires balance between abilities, keeping one’s place in given structures, and a humble attitude.

Leaders who are more inclusive and work on equity can represent the churches and be an inspiration to others. In this way, leaders already transfer knowledge of what inclusive leadership looks like. As role models, leaders continue nurturing gifts and learning while promoting each person’s ability to offer something to leadership. Being open to receive also reflects openness to lead under the principle of inclusive love and care.



# Politics and Dialogue

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The topic focuses on reconciliation addressing the political aspects of radicalization, extremism, lack of dialogue among differences, and people accepting political differences without becoming radical. The use of social media in a responsible manner and acknowledging its consequences is also discussed.

## **Politics**

When you hear this word, what feelings do you have? Take a moment to identify them.

Frustration? Empowerment? Anger? Apathy? Belonging? Participating? Impotence? Indifference? Manipulated? Distrusting? Connectedness? Tiresome? Happiness? Restlessness? Shame? Satisfaction?

When it comes to politics it seems like dialogue and reconciliation are becoming increasingly difficult. There seems to be a growing unwillingness to listen to the other person's ideas, feelings, especially when they are quite different from our own. Individualism is getting stronger. Concern for the greater good and for the general well-being of all creation seems to be diminishing. Social media seems to give much more attention to sensationalism, lies and the evil which is being perpetrated in the world than to all the good and solidary actions that are being carried out by so many people and groups. How can we work on reconciliation and dialogue in the midst of all this? Obviously, there is no one answer, there is no recipe that will fix it all. But there are strategies and actions that can put us on the path of working for peace and reconciliation.

As one can see from the quick, informal survey done with a few people about what feelings surge up when the word politics is said or read, there are mixed feelings, but what predominates are negative feelings. One of the first steps in the work for dialogue and reconciliation is becoming aware and being able to identify one's feelings. After identifying the feelings, we need to try to understand what causes these feelings.

It is often easier to identify feelings and causes when we are in small groups of people we trust. Many congregations already have various groups formed. Would there be a possibility of beginning conversations about politics in these groups? Why is it important that we deal with the issue of politics? Is there any real possibility of living in this world without being affected by politics? What is the meaning of politics? What does the Bible have to say about politics? What does Martin Luther have to say about politics?

Let us begin our study remembering what the root of the word politics is. It comes from the Greek - πολιτικός (*politikos*) from πολίτης (*polites*, 'citizen') and πόλις (*polis*, 'city'). From this one derives the meaning 'affairs of the cities'. In other words, it means citizens taking care of the cities regarding both human relations and physical sustenance. Citizens are all of us, dwellers of the planet. In order to take care of the city or the place where we live there needs to be organization, people need laws, structures, institutions, organizations to be able to develop a healthy, fulfilling, dignified life for all the citizens of the place. Developing public policies and organizing and executing the work of constructing and maintaining a city so that all citizens may have a good quality of life is what politics in its essence is about. This seems basic and simple enough. Why then, are such strong feelings expressed when one talks of politics?

Shall we start at the beginning? Remember that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, the earth with all its diversity of creatures and plants. Among the creatures God created was the human being, who God created in God's image and God put the human being in charge of taking care of God's creation. God had declared that this creation, all of it, was very good (Gen 1). God's desire was that this creation with humanity in it live in harmony and peace, all having what was needed for their well-being (Gen 1:29-30). The human being was God's collaborator in the care of God's creation. God also gave the human being the freedom to choose to follow or not follow God's precepts for the well living of all creation. When the human beings gave into the temptation of wanting to know as much as God and be wise, be like God (Gen 3: 5-6) they broke their relationship with God and thus sin began. What has this to do with politics?

Caring for the community and place in which one lives involves relating with other people, trusting the other, working out agreements for how



things should be cared for. When human beings put being equal to God as their goal, they are despising their role as collaborators and assuming a power role giving way to power plays. When human beings turn from collaborating with God in caring for the world to wanting to be God, have power over others, we see greed of power and wealth corrupt politics. Thus, over time, politics has become riddled with power plays, being deviated from its main purpose, which is to care for and protect creation, society, human beings. This has led to a major distrust in “politics”, causing so many negative feelings to be evoked upon the mention of “politics”. But the world cannot exist without politics.

Martin Luther provides us with an interesting interpretation of the function of politics: “*Before sin there was no political organization because it was not necessary. Political organization is the necessary remedy for a corrupted nature*” (Selected Works, v. 12, p.134).

“After the fall, the human being’s freedom was transformed into a power which threatens life. For this reason, God instituted politics as an emergency disposition. Politics is expressed in the coercive and punitive power of the state, the task of which is to maintain order and protect against corruption. At the same time, Politics has the function of promoting economic justice: “We need sovereigns and authorities who have eyes and will to install and maintain order in all commercial business and transactions, so that the poor not be overwhelmed and oppressed, having to deal with the sins of others.” (*Large Catechism*, p. 64 in Portuguese)

Luther understood politics not only as a necessary evil or coercive power. He recognized that God created people to relate in friendly and harmonious ways. From this predisposition toward social organization, politics is also a constitutive and guarantor of human existence. This is why each human being participates in politics, be it as citizens or as a person who carries out a political position.” (Base Text for the Theme of the Year of 2018 of the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil – IECLB. p. 3).

Throughout much of the history of civilizations it seems that politics has been exactly the opposite of Luther’s definition. It seems to be increasingly used to divide and create great rifts between people, leading to violence, hate and death. How can we recover the root essence of politics making it a tool to be used to promote justice and dignity among people?

Obviously, there is no one solution. It does us well to remember that great transformations happen through small actions. All we can do is plant the seeds. In a congregation there might be a group or several groups in which a member leader or a minister could suggest talking about politics from this perspective that we have presented here—not party politics, but politics as a necessary tool for caring for the city, the nation, the world.

One could start out with reading Genesis chapter 1: 29-31, then Genesis 3:5-6 and after that the two paragraphs above by Luther about politics. After the reading, suggest some listening activities, like the following:

First have the group sit in a circle, since when we are in a circle every person can see the other person, thus facilitating dialogue. Have the participants reflect on what true listening is. For there to be any dialogue and especially any reconciliation there first needs to be true listening. Have them reflect on what takes place when they feel truly listened to. What actions, gestures, words, facial expressions make a person feel truly listened to? The leader and a volunteer participant could act out three or four situations in which true listening is not happening. Ask how the participants felt. Then act out two scenes where true listening is happening. Ask how the participants felt. Now suggest some activities where this listening is going to be put into practice.

A brainstorming activity could be done where the question asked would be: "What feelings rise up when you hear the word politics?". Continuing in a circle, everyone can talk, taking turns, making sure all are naming feelings. Since it is a brainstorming activity, it is not a time for argumentation, defense or rebuttal. The point is simply to carefully listen to each other, to name the feelings, and someone write them down on a sheet of brown paper.

Now have the group break up into smaller groups, of four or five people, or if the group is already small stay in the full group. Have everyone look at the feelings written on the brown paper sheet, taking a few minutes to read and assimilate them. Then have the group choose two negative feelings and two positive feelings. Open a sharing time about the possible causes for the negative feelings. Stipulate that each one can express what they think and that there will be no rebuttal or argumentation. The point is to try to listen carefully to try and understand and respect where these feelings come from. All are valid. No one is better or worse than the other. Someone can write down these causes on another brown paper sheet. After each person has had a chance to share about the causes for the negative feelings, begin the sharing about the causes for the positive feelings, with the same stipulations, practicing listening carefully, with no rebuttal or argumentation, trying to understand and respect the statements.

One of the results from an activity such as the one described above is people being able to realize that they have things in common. They have feelings in common, they have understandings of causes in common. By taking time to actively listen to the other person one increases the chances of understanding where that person is coming from. Through this understanding the possibilities increase of finding common ground and this in turn helps to open paths for cooperative and collaborative transformative actions. Taking a general overview of the societies which are more peaceful, where there is a concerted effort to build conditions where all the citizens may

live well, in dignity and peace, one can observe that time is taken to listen to the citizens. Active listening is one of the main keys to transformation from violence to peace. There will be more peace, when through listening, politics is slowly understood as a tool for promoting justice and care and not as a weapon to be yielded to divide and subjugate.

A follow-up activity to the ones suggested above would be for the participants in the groups to work out possible, real-life strategies that could be carried out for transforming the causes of the negative feelings toward politics, maybe using the causes for the positive feelings as stimulators.

What about social media and its impact on this dialogue for peaceful change? Social media has had a tremendous impact, both positive and negative, on the direction society is taking in terms of politics and political relationships in the world. The capacity for mobilizing people around causes has greatly increased which is a great tool if used for the general good of the people and not for harming and destroying unwanted people. The capacity for disseminating news is unfathomable, both good and bad. The real challenge of social media is that it is open to so much information of all types, both useful, constructive, and true but also very destructive and fake. And, this negative side of social media propitiates and instigates so much of the hate and violence that we are seeing growing in the world.

So how can we counteract this negative side of social media and use this media in a way that transmits the message of God's love and care for God's people and empowers people to be prophetic, following in Christ's footsteps of denouncing injustice and loving and caring for the most vulnerable of God's people? How can we deal with fake news? What are the consequences of the spread of fake news? What are the roots of our being so gullible to believing fake news? How can we channel the use of social media to constructive, love-filled purposes?

A first step in beginning to use social media for constructive purposes would be to work in groups to try to understand how our belief systems can make us more vulnerable to believing different types of information. For example: if I have a strong belief in alternative medicine this makes me more vulnerable to believing fake news about possible alternative treatments for COVID 19. One of the ways we could learn to read more critically is to become aware of how our belief systems play into what we accept and don't accept from the information we receive from social media. As we become more aware of our fixed ideas, we will be better able to perceive how they influence our judgement and interpretations of the information we receive. We need to learn to discern between the information that leads to fulfilling God's call to justice, caring and love, especially for the most vulnerable of God's people and the information that leads to bad decisions, destruction of relations and lives, which is counter to God's will.

Once again, active listening activities can be used as starting points. In small groups you might study this theme beginning in a circle with questions to first bring out the feelings and experiences, remembering, at this first moment, that the point is to actively and fully listen to one another and not to argue or try to prove one's point, change someone's opinion, etc. One must refrain from argumentations, rebuttals, or criticisms and work on active listening for people to feel that they are in a safe space to share maybe paradoxical or even controversial talks.

Some suggestions for questions:

- What are some good experiences you have had with social media? How did they make you feel?
- What are some bad experiences you have had with social media? How did these bad experiences make you feel?
- Were they related to fake news?
- Did what you believe about a certain topic influence your belief in the fake news?

After sharing feelings and experiences maybe the group could be instigated to think about or present ways that social media could be used to carry positive messages about politics in its root meaning. How can we work with social media in a way that it can complement and strengthen our calling to denounce the unjust and hurtful ways politics is being used and announce the loving and caring ways Christ calls us to use politics? What concrete measures can we take to mitigate the impact of fake news? There might be people in the groups who have experience investigating and checking news to verify if it is fake or not. These skills could be shared. There could be time planned in groups for people to practice using the news checking tools and discuss the results. People could be encouraged to later share these tools with other family members and groups.

What could be some results of this collective work together? Plan sequential meetings to work on practical actions to be carried out, actions that can change how we use social media, actions that can change how we deal with politics and how we carry out politics. The challenge is to keep present in front of us the goal of following Christ through spreading love, caring, respect, justice, solidarity, and in this way bring about dialogue for peaceful change.

# Migration: The Church as a Mediative Presence and Mitigation of Conflicts

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## **Introduction**

When we think of migration, angry nationalist politicians or abstract political arguments may be the first thing that come to mind. Migration and the conflicts around it are more than abstractions or distant arguments. The hostility carried out against migrants has consequences for many people around the world. With such consequences, we see the necessity of the church to be a voice and actor for a better way forward. In the face of injustice, God is not silent. Yet, Christians often remain inactive. Our calling is higher, and we need adequate tools to face these migration-centered conflicts around the world and step up to what God has called us to do. Given the high stakes, it is the responsibility of church leaders at all levels to reclaim the mediative role of the church in such conflicts centered around migration. In this portion of this resource, I present a framework for understanding conflicts surrounding human migration, the role of the church, and actionable skills and steps leaders can take to lead their people in faith-centered conversations about how God calls us to act in the middle of these issues.

## Migration and conflict: Rethinking the cause

The church's role begins with proper awareness and understanding of the problem. A common narrative around migration-centered conflicts may sound like this: A group becomes displaced through war, threat of violence, or other severe hardship. The group leaves an unstable situation looking for safety and a better life. It crosses borders and ends up in a new country or region. In that new place, its presence is noticed and felt. Hostility toward this group increases, often starting with a nationalist political party. From here, political leaders start blaming, scapegoating, or labeling these migrants with all sorts of characterizations and slurs that undermine their humanity. Hostility from leadership fosters this same feeling in populations of the new country; hostile voices defame migrants to infuriate a political base and blame new migrants for old problems. Rather than being seen as people who are in need of humanitarian aid, migrants fleeing war or violence are treated as a security problem or drain on the system in the place they now live.

This narrative describes many places. The United States<sup>1</sup> and Brazil<sup>2</sup> are examples in the Americas. Language around Brexit and from nationalist parties across Europe reflects this narrative as well.<sup>3</sup> Examples of this pattern are not hard to find. That this pattern emerges and repeats across many different countries and cultures signifies that there is a deeper common source.

So what is the problem? Is it the act of migration? The migrants themselves? The politicians who blame and scapegoat? The dialogue usually stays at that level, with each person trying to figure out who is responsible for the conflicts that emerge. People arrive at their conclusions of who is guilty, whether it is the migrants, politicians, or another responsible party. Once people have picked their side, they then assign blame and do their best to punish those who are wrong—as if assigning blame and punishing the right people is a productive way forward. Conflicts around the world follow a similar pattern, with each person blaming or getting angry in accordance with their political position.

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<sup>1</sup> Washington Post Staff, "Full Text: Donald Trump Announces a Presidential Bid." *Washington Post*, 16 June 2015. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/06/16/full-text-donald-trump-announces-a-presidential-bid/?arc404=true>

<sup>2</sup> Londoño, Ernesto. "Bolsonaro Pulls Brazil from U.N. Migration Accord." *New York Times*, 9 January 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/09/world/americas/bolsonaro-brazil-migration-accord.html>

<sup>3</sup> Sundburg, Jan. "Who are the Nationalist Finns Party?" *BBC News*, 11 May 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32627013>

Scott Detrow, "From 'Brexit' to Trump, Nationalist Movements Gain Momentum Around World." *NPR*, 25 June 2016. <https://www.npr.org/2016/06/25/483400958/from-brexit-to-trump-nationalist-movements-gain-momentum-around-world>

To understand such conflicts at the level which creates and sustains them, I turn briefly to social identity theory to understand the psychological and sociological factors at work. The foundation of this theory is categorization, a cognitive process in which humans place all things, people included, into categories. As a part of self-understanding and out of the psychological need for belonging, humans self-categorize into groups that provide meaning and value. These groups become a part of a person's social identity – simply understood as the way a person defines themselves as a part of a group. For example, the sentence “I am a Lutheran” would reflect one social identity.<sup>4</sup>

While the process of categorization and identity-formation recognizes the difference between groups, these differences do not by their existence lead to hostility. Yet it is through these differences humans begin to think in terms of “us” and “them.” This “us” and “them” view of the world helps model what can happen cognitively in response to migration. We see the psychological and sociological development of an “us,” and the development of a “them” as these two distinct groups come in contact. The question remains: how do these differences between groups lead to conflict?

Marilynn Brewer, in her work on social identity theory, suggests a continuum in the way that these identities move people from low to high levels of hostility. After self-categorization, as previously described, the next stage would be ingroup positivity. At this step, positive identification with a group does not lead to overt conflict, yet positivity toward the ingroup may be denied to the outgroup and lead to discrimination, either intentional or unintentional. The next stage of her continuum is intergroup comparison, simply understood as the shift from “my group is good” to “my group is better.” While not inherently antagonistic, many people who identify conflicts at this stage see competition, moral judgement, and overt favoritism, which are visible signs of conflict. The final stage of this continuum with the highest level of hostility is outgroup antagonism and aggression, where harm of the outgroup is the goal unto itself. There are many factors, based on this theoretical approach, which give insight into how people move toward the aggressive end of the continuum. Perceptions of the outgroup as a threat, power politics, competition over resources, and many other factors lead toward deeper levels of hostility.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Korostelina, Karina Valentinovna. *Social Identity and Conflict: Structures, Dynamics, and Implications*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Jussim, Lee, Richard D. Ashmore, and David Wilder. “Introduction.” In *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction*, edited by Richard Ashmore, Lee Jussim, and David Wilder, 3-14. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Brewer, Marilynn. “Ingroup Identification and Intergroup Conflict.” In *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction*, edited by Richard Ashmore, Lee Jussim, and David Wilder, 17-41. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

This very brief look at social identity theory demonstrates how these conflicts function within the human mind. Questions of “us and them,” which in many instances turn into “us against them,” are the foundation on which conflicts around migration are built. While there are many ways this theory plays out in the world, it is particularly visible in migration-centered conflicts. The way people speak about migration in these conflicts is arguments about the definition of “us” and “them.” Politicians argue about who is in and who is out, who is like “us” and shares “our” values. Understanding the processes driving this type of conflict allows the church to focus on addressing this “us and them” or “us against them” mindset, and in so doing, more productively and faithfully address the heart of these identity-driven divisions.

## **The church: Clarifying our calling**

Amid these migration-based conflicts, the church faces the challenge of being a kingdom-building presence. By facing the deeper identity issues beneath the political surface, the church is better able to live out its calling and to speak in a way that moves us closer to the kingdom-way of living. The role of the church is to be a mediative presence.

A mediative presence from the church is one that stands outside of political dualisms and works to draw people together for a viable and faithful alternative found in God’s calling for us in the world. It addresses the “us” and “them” through defining who we are as God’s people and how we see others as created in God’s image. Our mediative role is impartial, but it is not neutral. As a mediative presence between political poles, the church is not a disinterested third party. Rather the church, driven by the gospel, draws people toward a more faithful way.

The story of Scripture speaks for itself: the Israelites wandering the desert, the voice of the prophets, and the life and teachings of Jesus Christ provide a clear theological vision of welcome and hospitality to the stranger. Yet the church fails to live into the reality of this vision every day. The world—church included—continues to be comfortable with the sins of the status quo. Our own complacency may provide our greatest challenge. The violence, hatred, misogyny, racism, colonialism, and economic inequalities that currently drive people from their homes are not external to the history and life of the church. The change we hope to create as we face migration conflicts is internal as well as external—we transform ourselves so that we, in turn, might transform the world.

I want to take a moment to look at what I currently see happening at many levels of the church. From my small slice of experience of the Lutheran church, I see churches and congregational leaders reacting to



conflicts about migration by correcting lies and joining the cacophony of reactions over policies. I see leadership, which relies on statements made via social media in reaction to the situation migrants face. In this reactive approach to migration conflicts, we allow other people to set the agenda, and focus our energy on things that are not centered around the calling of the gospel. While many church-affiliated agencies are engaged in productive accompaniment and advocacy, they are often distant from our public conversations and the life of the congregation. Instead of addressing conflict at the foundational level of the “us and them,” we too often rely on statements from bishops, pastor-presidents, and far-off leaders while our pastors and congregations avoid acting themselves.

This does not address the topic of migration at the level at which it separates us. Little of time and effort is spent deconstructing the divisions between “us and them.” Therefore, little of our work leads to progress. Simply giving more information or correcting lies is not a productive approach to leading the faithful in the way of God. If it were, we could simply say the right thing, declare victory, and move on. Instead, we must dive into these deep “us and them” divisions in order to be a healing voice. Our theological foundations call us to question these divisions beyond participating in the surface-level disagreements. Through theological questioning of these divisions, reflecting on the scriptures and asking where God is truly leading, we center ourselves on the transformative work of the gospel.

While we cannot ignore the politics, our positions as the church are not a referendum on the positions of the popular political parties. By focusing on a faith-centered response, leaders remove the power from politics and place it in the hand of God. As the problem is a theological one, conflicts around migration are issues for all faithful Christians. God gives every single Christian the responsibility to do the work of crossing these invisible boundaries we construct between ourselves and the migrant. Christians cannot only look upwards in our hierarchy to pastors and church leaders to do the work God is calling each Christian to do.

Important to the church’s call is the focus on real and concrete change. Concrete change does not happen when we offer solutions based on an incomplete understanding of the problem we face. Popular reactions in these migration-centered conflicts of posting and arguing on social media simply serve to make those who do it capture all the feeling of having done something without having done anything at all. With an “us” and “them” understanding of the conflict, our practices should do the hard work of meeting the needs of the migrant and deconstructing these barriers people create. By focusing on addressing migration-centered conflict in ways that address this “us and them” division, the church can lead to real change in the world.

In the next sections, I look at some skills as well as practical steps forward for any faith leader taking steps to address conflicts around migration in their context. These skills and steps serve to help create that real and concrete change within the group that participates in the process. By focusing on the human and psychological needs we all share, leaders may take these and apply them in faithful ways that fit their culture and context.

## Skills for answering the call

If the church is to be a mediative presence in hard conversations about migration, it needs the skills to carry out the tasks ahead. Moving beyond the politics and seeing the “us against them” dynamic opens up the possibilities for the church to live up to its calling. As a mediative presence, the church carries the responsibility to live as a place of faithful deliberation where our language, our speech, our actions, and our teachings help deconstruct the barriers between us and them. For our actions to match that barrier-breaking goal, the following skills allow for the work of the Spirit to lead us to where God calls us.

The church must communicate in a way that encourages vulnerability, openness, listening, and change, and makes room for the Spirit. In this, we model the kind of healing communication we hope to elicit in others. If the church is to be heard as a mediative presence that points to the way of Christ, we cannot communicate in a way that threatens. Our way forward must draw people in—even the people who might be most hostile to migration and migrants. To ensure we communicate in a way that encourages and enables the walls to come down and for people to engage in the vulnerability, *Navigating Conflict and Change: DPC Handbook Part 1* suggests these as skills to be built for mediative communication: empathetic listening, suspending judgement, engaging with questions, and paraphrasing.<sup>6</sup>

The skill of empathetic listening requires the ability to silence one’s own voice and listen fully and deeply to another. Practicing empathetic listening involves listening for and understanding the person’s values, needs, and situation. It is not necessary to agree to empathize; the point is understanding. While we can maintain our own disagreement, our responses seek understanding instead of correction. Rather than responding with one’s own opposing perspective, a person practicing empathetic listening responds with questions to deepen understanding of the other’s situation and beliefs.

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<sup>6</sup> Craig, Colin, *Navigating Conflict and Change: DPC Handbook Part 1*. 2019.

Another skill of mediative communication is suspending judgment. In situations of deep conflict and hostility toward migrants, we should not be surprised to hear hostility reflected in our initial conversations. Likely, our instinct is to correct, and the stronger we are offended by what people say, the stronger our rebukes. If loud disagreement and judgment were a productive way to speak about migration, we could productively have hard conversations about migration with only our own natural instincts. Suspending judgment creates a space where the most hidden feelings can be named aloud. Once those are spoken, leaders can invite that person into deep reflection on where they think God is in what they have said. This task is not a neutral one and does not remain silent in the face of antagonism. Instead, suspending judgment and listening allow us to ask questions centered on bringing forward the teaching of the gospel. Our responsibility is to hear the person, understand them fully, and ask in an appropriate way “What do you think God has to say?” The leader’s task is not to win an argument with facts, logic or with a well-selected proof text. As leaders in the Christian church, we are responsible to help people hear God’s calling in their lives and lead them to faithful witness. By suspending judgment, listening, probing deeper, and asking people to reflect theologically on what has been said, we speak to the identity-level processes that shape these conflicts and let the Holy Spirit correct and guide.

The skills of asking open-ended questions and paraphrasing build on the first two skills. Asking open-ended questions invites the other person to explain, and to help us understand further their position. While each of us can already ask questions, the skill is asking questions in ways that do not sound like hidden accusations or judgements. Word choice, tone, and authentic intent are all important. For example, the meaning behind the question “What do you mean by that?” changes greatly depending on the tone with which it is said. Once these questions are answered, the skills of paraphrasing and summarizing what the other person has said help people feel heard and respected. These important listening skills build trust and understanding, both of which are a necessary element in these conversations to lead to positive change.

Telling meaningful stories is another powerful skill. Stories which capture attention and speak at an emotional level help move past the “us and them” understanding and to see the human in the other. Sharing stories about migrants serves the important function of humanizing them when these conflicts have dehumanizing consequences. Stories can reframe our understanding and encourage empathy. Statistics never speak to the heart in the way that a compelling story can.

Utilizing these skills is a ministry-long process, which gets easier over time. As with any skill, these tools of mediative communication require

practice. For congregations or groups addressing migration, it is the task of all leaders and participants to faithfully build these skills and offer grace when others fall short.

## **Doing the work: Using the skills in the church**

While there is no universal solution, I offer the following process that leaders can appropriately adapt to the context which they serve for leading a group through study and conversation about migration issues. This process follows these steps:

1. Find your moment
2. Plan for listening and discussion
3. Listen and discuss, focusing on faith
4. Discern and act
5. Reflect and plan for the future

This process is intended to be adaptable for use in faith groups of various sizes and complexities. Recognizing the importance of culture and the unique aspects of every conflict, this loose framework appeals to a common purpose in our faith and seeks to address the “us against them” through faithful reflection on how God is calling us to act.

Leadership in this process is crucial. For anyone to begin this process successfully, there must be a level of confidence and trust in the person who is inviting others to participate in this process. Ideally, this process is facilitated or led by someone who knows the group well and is well respected and trusted. This may be a bishop, pastor, deacon, or lay leader. People will take their cues from someone they respect, and particularly with difficult topics when emotions run high, it is best if the leader has the trust of the people to have these difficult conversations. The leader must model the behavior expected from the participants and be able to bring the conversation back to faith-centered reflection.

### **Find your moment**

Timing is tricky. As every leader has likely experienced, trying to force something that people are not ready for meets strong resistance. At the same time, it is not our call to wait for other people to do the work of justice. As issues around migration build, there are events, which capture attention, inspire more action, or make the issues around migration more

visible in our communities than they were before. Leaders at all levels can listen for these moments and be prepared to lead faithful reflection. There may be an event that causes great discussion in the news or in your community. Or, migration conflicts may just slowly bubble up in a way that needs to be addressed. Either way, leaders need to listen for those moments when the time is ripe, so they are prepared to help people to lead reflection in a faithful manner.

The unfortunate reality is that it is not always clear when the right timing is. Begin this process too early and it may fail due to resistance or not enough participation. Too late, and it will feel like this process was something already needed. It is up to the leader to trust themselves and trust that they know their people. To do something is better than doing nothing, and whether too early or too late, this process provides more benefit than avoiding a difficult conversation.

### **Plan for listening and discussion**

Once the timing is right, a leader can take steps toward discussion. Leaders must control the process through which these difficult conversations happen. In this step, leaders design a culturally and contextually appropriate means of discussion, which centers on faith-based questions about migration. This can take many forms, including Bible study, a book study, a discussion group, a common project, shared worship, or other ways of gathering people for faithful reflection. An intentional and agreed-upon plan provides a process for the group moving forward that all can agree to and provides clear expectations for all participants.

Part of creating this plan is setting guidelines for behavior and dialogue. First is the importance of confidentiality. All participants must agree that what is said is done so in confidence. It is not that what happens is done in a secretive manner, but if we are asking people to be honest and vulnerable, people need to trust what they say in a vulnerable moment will not be shared with others. Once all have agreed to confidentiality, the participants must agree with how they are going to interact with each other. As a leader, set the culturally appropriate ways for your group to interact, encouraging any disagreement to focus on the ideas and not the people who share them. The group must agree to these guidelines ahead of time. If at any point a group member's actions go beyond what everyone has agreed to, it is the role of the leader or facilitator to name this and gracefully remind the group of the guidelines.

One final guideline is, at any time, people are free to remove themselves from the conversation without judgment. For any number of reasons,

people may feel uncomfortable in these conversations that make it best for them to not continue to be part of the discussion. While a pastor or leader can hear their concerns and offer whatever guidance, nobody should feel pressured to remain if they are not comfortable in these conversations.

Leaders can be creative with how they plan to lead discussion, but I cannot emphasize enough the importance of our faith-based approach to this deeply theological issue. In order to move past the “us” and “them” divide at the heart of divisions over migration, the church must constantly ask of ourselves, “Where is God in this situation and how is God calling us to participate?” The continued focus on what God has to say in this situation is the focus and purpose of these conversations. These are questions of faithful discernment, not political bickering. When both traditional and social media are built to profit from divisions, it is the church that provides a better way forward in real connection to our neighbor through processes such as this that allow us to be a faithful, mediative presence across our divisions.

The migrant perspective must be a part of these conversations. It may be best for your group to invite someone to speak and share his or her experience of migration directly. Or, when levels of hostility are high, it may be appropriate to use books, memoirs, published interviews, movies, or past news events that can share the migrant perspective. This indirect narrative is still a valid way of hearing the migrant perspective. Regardless of the approach, the migrant’s voice should be heard rather than talked about in its absence.

When creating this space for listening and reflection, there are advantages and disadvantages to homogeneous groups and heterogeneous groups. If using news stories or a book, participants in homogeneous groups may feel more comfortable opening up with people like them. In this type of setting, more may be shared, and people may feel more comfortable challenging their own ideas and beliefs. The advantage of groups feeling safe to express more is countered by the disadvantage of not having the migrant perspective present in a real way. To this end, heterogeneous groups have the advantage of providing more diverse viewpoints and more interpersonal relationship building across divisions. Each can be appropriate and valuable; it is up to the leader to make the decision that is most appropriate for the group. Being intentional about the approach brings awareness of the benefits and disadvantages and allows leaders to use advantages fully.

### **Listen and discuss, focusing on faith**

Using the skills of mediative communication, follow the plan for engagement as designed for your group’s situation. Following the agreed-upon

process, it is the group's responsibility to discuss and participate. Often, bishops, pastors, and other church leaders want to provide solutions for the group. However, the most powerful and edifying moments are moments of self-realization which generally do not come from others telling us what or how to think. As a pastor or leader, you can ask questions to elicit deeper responses; you can ask questions of how a person thinks the gospel speaks to what they have just said; you can paraphrase and summarize in order that you understand. But it is not your job to make a change in and for other people—that is the work of the Holy Spirit.

When these conversations happen because of conflict, bringing out hostile feelings and listening for negative emotions is necessary. To bring these feelings out and address them is an important part of these experiences. What is not brought to light cannot be addressed in the light. The tools of mediative communication provide a powerful resource for maintaining a productive dialogue rather than arguments. Any racist, xenophobic, or otherwise hostile remark should be addressed directly using these mediative skills. Without casting blame, without a negative tone, the leader should use all the skills of mediative communication to probe deeper and shine the light of the gospel into the darkness of what might be said.

As noted in the previous section, this discussion is centered on theological questions. At first, participants may fall back into the familiar patterns of disagreement along political lines rather than focusing on faith. The sooner the leader or facilitator can bring the conversation back to the theological rather than the political, the less difficult that transition is.

## **Discern and act**

In this step, what has been discussed finds a path toward action. The question changes from “What does God have to say?” to “What is God calling us to do?” During this step, the group names where they have discerned God calling them to action and take steps to act accordingly. Leaders use all tools of spiritual discernment, such as prayer, worship, fasting, and other spiritual practices in addition to the theological study that has taken place as a part of this process.

Pay careful attention to cultural sensitivities in how this step is carried out. Many people who are part of the dominant culture, no matter how well meaning, may not see the needs of the situation in the same way as the migrant. Because of the importance of meeting real and felt needs, it is wise to be in contact with migrant communities to understand with them what the needs are and how your group might best accompany them.

A simple starting point is finding groups who already work with migrant communities and joining in their work.

There will be differing opinions in this process of discernment. While it is likely disagreement remains in the group, there is almost surely some action that all can agree on. The more the group members can take ownership of this process apart from the leader, the more likely they are to follow through and take responsibility for this change in their lives.

## **Reflect and plan for the future**

At this point, the leader and group reflect on their progress, and assess where they are and where they have moved from. Celebrate progress Give thanks for God's guidance along the way. At the same time, in honest reflection, ask the questions: What work remains to be done? What are next steps for the future? What resources do we need to allocate for continued action? No matter how much progress is made, there will always be more work that God has for us.

No one group event or procedure can be a panacea for all conflicts about migration. Even though this is the final step in a process, it is not the end of the church's work. The leader and participants can and should continue to work together to decide how to carry their progress forward. This step recognizes the work that has been done and looks to the future for where God continues to call our communities in love and service to the migrant. For small groups, congregations, or larger church bodies, this step is the ongoing commitment to God's call in our lives.

I encourage any leader to make a concrete plan for maintaining the progress that has been made at this point. It is easy to say that things will continue, but without a plan in place, inaction overtakes good intentions. That the work must continue is vital—the group cannot simply discern God's presence, take one action, and then declare victory. While this process is over, there may be continued work they want to plan as a result of their discernment processes. It may even be applicable to start this process over again for further study and continued discernment.

## **Putting this practice in place**

While these five steps will not heal every wound or heal every heart, this process carries out the faithful work of Christian reflection beyond antagonistic political discourse. It re-centers a community of faith around God's word and God's work in the world. This process focuses on real and



concrete ways people can faithfully love and serve their neighbors and carry out God's work. It makes the commitment to carry this work into the future. As an answer to the racism, xenophobia, and all other hostilities thrown at migrants, the church through this process lives out its witness to a better way forward. At all levels, this kind of dialogue helps the church be a mediative presence in these conflicts. As it does this work of faith, it helps groups redefine "us" and the relationship with "them"—the very question at the heart of these conflicts.

On a wider scale, I believe it is possible to take these steps and adapt them across a larger audience beyond the local level. While this process works best locally, the framework may be adapted for a wider audience with less direct contact and still find success. In addressing a wider audience, the steps remain the same but are adapted. As they are adapted for a wider audience, it is important to emphasize depth on the topic. If one of the problems of widespread communication around migration is the shallow politics, any attempt at widespread communication needs to engage people with depth on the issue. Depth should not be sacrificed for reach when dealing with a difficult topic. While the size of the group or distance may pose a logistical challenge for large-scale discernment and action, I do not suggest skipping that step. Ask faith-based questions, encourage discernment and as best as can be done, and collectively act in a way that is most agreeable. While scaling this for larger groups or across church bodies may pose additional challenges, it is not impossible for them to be overcome.

This process may be adaptable and scaled down for smaller-scale conversation as well. A particularly heated one-on-one conversation may benefit by following the same steps in an adapted form. For example, if someone is in front of you and angry, that is not your time for a nuanced conversation about God's presence in the world. Find your time—say you think this conversation is important, and you would like to sit down with them and have a longer conversation at another time. This allows emotions to settle and allows you time to make a plan. You can even think of guidelines that you can politely request of the other. Focusing on the faith remains important. Discerning and planning for the future may look the same in these conversations—finding ways to keep the conversation going in productive and healthy ways. In these smaller-scale conversations, the skills of mediative communication play a particularly important role.

For our present moment, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to shape the world, and there is no immediate end in sight. While the pandemic complicates all our ways of gathering, there is no reason that this framework cannot be used via many forms of technology to a productive end. However, be cautious of having this conversation via social media due

to the many ways the popular platforms enhance the divisions we are trying to break down. I remain skeptical of attempting to use a source of our division as a tool to overcome the problem it helps create. If meeting virtually, I encourage utilizing video, if possible, so participants can see one another. In utilizing such technologies, I encourage the leader to help others who may be less familiar with the technology so that everyone feels confident and that they can be heard throughout the process.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic complicates this process by raising the general level of anxiety everyone experiences. In times of higher anxiety (pandemic or otherwise), the built-up energy often gets released in unhealthy ways, and disagreements may feel harsher and more negative. When in times of higher anxiety, the tools of mediative communication become all the more important. Yet high anxiety is not an excuse for inaction. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the need for conversation about migration and magnified the needs of populations who are already marginalized and face increased risks. With such a great need, our call does not diminish. While our church leaders are doing so much to hold communities together, we cannot ignore the needs of our neighbor. We cannot be faithful to our calling without doing the work of having hard conversations.

## **Conclusion**

The church as a mediative presence in migration-centered conflict has quite the task ahead of it. The church and its leaders must reject superficial narratives and focus energy and resources addressing the “us” against “them” mindset, which underlies the conflict. The God-given task of our church members at all levels is to remove these barriers by intentionally listening to the voice of God and to live as a community of deliberation, reflection, and reconciliation. Through this framework, the tools of mediative communication, and process above, the church might find its way forward in its calling.

We cannot forget the stakes are high. These conflicts, no matter how distant or abstract they feel, affect people around the world. In the severity of these conflicts, there are real consequences of inaction. Despite whatever political consequences, Christians live out our scriptural imperative for welcome and hospitality to the stranger and do the hard work for real and concrete change that such a situation demands of us.

# From Conflict to Reconciliation: Looking at the Ecological Dimension

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## **Introduction**

In one way or another, at some point all of us have been involved in a situation of conflict. This happens because we are diverse human beings and often our needs and wishes differ from the persons with whom we live. Thus, we can say that conflicts are constitutive to our relationships. For this reason, in one or another way, it is unavoidable to deal with them. However, our responses to situations of conflict are not always taught in advance. Sometimes, they emerge naturally. Our social and cultural context shapes the way we perceive, respond to and deal with situations of conflict.

For us, it is also normal to associate conflicts with bad and devastating situations. Although conflicts have a potential for confusion and destruction, they can also be agents of change and transformation. When standards no longer match expectations, when reality is no longer satisfactory and represent a threat to life, on such occasions conflicts may become opportunities to reestablish broken connections and to recover the lost balance in relationships.

At present, we are experiencing a very complex crisis that is severely threatening the continuity of life on the planet. Profound changes are being observed in the ecological systems and in the conditions of life that

favor our survival. High population growth, along with polluting modes of production, unfettered consumption and excessive exploitation of natural resources, have led humankind to a situation of alert. The effects of climate change, the loss of biological diversity, deforestation, desertification and the contamination of watercourses and fertile soils, besides the constant increase of poverty and inequalities, are impacts directly felt by millions of people on a daily basis.

The ecological crisis has awakened us to the need to reflect on our relationships in the world, our habits, needs and forms of consumption. Furthermore, it invites us to retrieve and exercise our Christian task and call to reconciliation. We are facing a situation that requires a posture of mediation, capable to open up spaces and enabling the search for new models of life and development based on a holistic and peaceful coexistence with God's creation and capable of meeting our needs without compromising the possibilities of future generations to meet their needs.

## **Socio environmental conflicts and ecological crisis**

In 2020 Earth Overshoot Day fell on 22 August. It drove our attention to the fact that we are demanding more natural resources and eco-systemic services than the planet is able to regenerate in one year. This data, provided by an international research organization called Global Footprint Network,<sup>1</sup> is the result of a calculation made on the basis of the planet's bio-capacity (i.e., the amount of resources that the earth can generate in one year) and on the ecological footprint (emissions of greenhouse gases and the amount of goods and services that we need to live). It points to the alarming fact that at present, we need 1.6 planets to meet our consumption demands.

Our modern civilization is built upon a paradigm that affirms the dominion of humans over things and operates by separating human beings from nature, which is exclusively seen as exhaustion of resources. This paradigm also shapes our understanding of progress and development. The unceasing search for economic growth and unlimited consumption has justified and influenced degradation and the collective, deliberate and systematic aggression against the planet, putting at risk our own survival and all forms of life. Statistical data confirms the need for a radical change in our modes of production, distribution and consumption. If nothing is done, the effects will be catastrophic and cause the planet to collapse in a short period of time.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see [www.footprintnetwork.org](http://www.footprintnetwork.org)

We may say that the ecological crisis results from various factors like, (a) climate change associated to global warming, resulting from the increase of greenhouse gases; (b) loss of biodiversity and destruction of ecosystems; (c) alterations in the bio-geo-chemical cycles caused by the increase of industrial activity, deforestation, contamination of soils and water courses; (d) growth of the world's population and resulting increase of social inequality; (e) changes in consumption patterns, based on a system of precocious and programmed obsolescence that shortens the life cycle of products.

Furthermore, Latin America's history is marked by ecological violations and socio environmental conflicts since its "discovery": murders of activists, attacks against initiatives of cooperation and protection of fauna and flora, invasions of and threats against protected territories for the purpose of exploitation, deforestation and degradation of ecosystems. At present, the most serious socio environmental conflicts are related to extractivism, land grabbing and disputes for land, advance of monoculture and farming and cattle raising. The region is clearly affected because it produces the so-called commodities (products that are used as raw material and exported at large scale). Although it plays a great and important role in the region's economy, the production of commodities also takes a heavy ecological toll.

The ecological crisis is directly related to the way we behave and understand our role and posture toward the world. The consequences are hard felt in the growing inequality, loss of dignity and progressive destruction of nature. The consumption culture that goes hand in hand with the prevailing development model, based on human satisfaction and economic performance, on unlimited growth and consumption and excessive exploitation of natural resources, is resulting in an irreparable devastation of the planet. If, on the one hand, we are the only ones who are responsible for the ecological crisis, on the other hand we are also the only ones capable of transforming reality aiming at the maintenance of life and the creation of mechanisms to restrain damage.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has made it evident that we are vulnerable and interdependent beings. It has shown that, even when keeping social distancing, our actions must be designed in a collective way. It, more than anything else, has proved that a real ecological impact is possible if we bring our efforts together. The worldwide paralyzing of industrial activities from the middle of March to April reduced the Earth Overshoot Day by 24 days in comparison with the previous year (in 2019 it occurred on 29 July), which demonstrated that the solutions to the ecological crisis are directly connected with a change in human beings' view, posture and behavior toward nature.

## The Christian calling to reconciliation

If we look at the Bible stories, we will see that human existence is based on three kinds of interconnected relationships: our relationship with God, our relationship with the neighbor and our relationship with creation. The first creation story (Gen 1:1-2:4a) speaks about the creation by God and the role of human beings toward it. First, God created the heavens and the earth and saw that everything that God had created was good. Then God created human being in God's image and likeness and blessed them to have dominion over the earth. In the second story (Gen 2:4b-25) God created human being and put them in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. In the beginning, there was shalom, integrity and wholeness in relationships. Then harmony between God, humankind and creation was damaged by sin, the "shalom" of the Garden of Eden was destroyed and the divine mandate to have dominion over the earth, to till it and to keep it was distorted, turning the harmonious relationship into a conflict (Gen 3:17-23).

However, God, in God's immense wisdom and love, even in the face of broken relationships, takes the initiative of restoring relationships: based on Jesus Christ and through faith, God reconciles all beings with Godself and establishes a new relationship of equality as a sign of the new coming kingdom. In this new creation, on the basis of baptism, alienated human beings are then justified, saved and reconciled with God (Rom 5:9-11). Based on the cross of Christ, expression of God's merciful love, human beings are called to be instruments of reconciliation in the world (2 Cor 5:18-19). Reconciliation is a merciful gift of God offered to the whole of creation. For this reason, human beings reconciled with God are called to also reconcile themselves with their neighbors and with nature.

In view of the present scenario, our call to the ministry of reconciliation acquires a unique importance and legitimates the need for reflection on the views that underlie our relationships in the world. Our responsibility as co-creators and God's stewards toward creation does not render us more important than the other creatures. On the contrary, our call and vocation point to responsibility to keep and maintain good relationships with the community of life, to take into account its whole dimension and keep in mind that each creature is important in the whole of creation. What makes us different from other creatures is our responsibility to work for the good and to promote fullness of life (Jn 10:10).

In the process of reconciliation, we are called to recognize that creation belongs completely to God. It is a heritage for all people and a gift for collective well-being. God is in everything and in all things created. God's creative act remains throughout history because God's activity as

Creator is permanent. God is present through God's Spirit and continuously calls us to get rid of our selfishness and to be able to live in love and live together in community, caring for the well-being of our neighbors and of the whole of creation.

This spirituality is lived in the concrete world as a transforming force for the promotion of love, peace, dignity and justice, for the restoration and strengthening of good relationships between God, humankind and creation. When we allow ourselves to see that God's proposal can be a reality through our actions, the reconciliation conveyed by God's word and the loving gesture of Jesus Christ could break barriers and become whole.<sup>2</sup> The radical present in this project is similar to that of the gospel of the kingdom that drastically transforms, liberates, and empowers.

The kingdom of God presented by Jesus Christ proposes transformation and liberation. It proposes a new life, a new way of living in the world based on justice and life with dignity and in fullness. It requires the restoration of human relationships, with God and creation. Relationships of injustice and submission produce an imbalance in the relationality with the community of life. This kingdom is founded upon *shalom*, the relationality that is established through well-being, care, wholeness, balance and justice. It is simultaneously healing, retribution, satisfaction, and reconciliation.

The ecological crisis challenges and calls us to be able to exercise our call to reconciliation and the task of mediation. This exercise enables us to understand nature as God's gift and the planet as an immense living community of which human being is a member. In this living community, all elements are interconnected and contribute to the collective well-being and good life. Our present context requires reflections and actions aimed at the construction of a new universal solidarity, of a real good life and good life together in community. Nevertheless, this good life is different from good living. It points to a horizon of meaning and transformation that requires the ability to rethink and reconstruct the way we relate in the world. It is a project of life that searches for complementarity, solidarity, harmony and reciprocity in all sorts of relations.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ângela Zitzke, "Reconciliação divina, humana e planetária: O desafio do amor divino diante da crise existencial humana e ecológica", *Horizonte*, Belo Horizonte, 7/14 (2009) 62-92, June, p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> "Good life" (*bem viver* in Portuguese; *buen vivir* in Spanish) is a philosophy of life, a utopia that impels the construction of an emancipation project that is constituted by many stories of resistance and proposals of transformation nurtured by different contributions and experiences. It is based on the communal paradigm of South American indigenous people, especially of the Andean people, but it is nurtured by different sources, including Western ones. It should be highlighted that for Latin American indigenous people the meaning of progress consists in the promotion of good life. i.e., of good life in community.

As a bearer of God's revelation to humankind and as responsible for reaching all people at every moment of history with the message of the kingdom announced by Jesus, the church has the task to alert people to the threats that put creation at risk. For this reason, the church cannot be indifferent to the ecological crisis; otherwise, it would fail to fulfil its mission of being a mediator of the salvation offered by God in Jesus Christ. Since it is the bearer of the gospel of peace (Eph 6:15) and of the message of reconciliation (2 Co 5:19), the church as the body of Christ, is equipped to act as a true ambassador of Christ in the world by executing its task of mediation and announcing reconciliation.

Thus, the Christian contribution to the solution of the ecological crisis and socio environmental conflicts is profoundly connected to the way we understand, based on our faith perspective, our relationships in the whole of creation and our call to the ministry of reconciliation. The way we deal with socio environmental and ecological issues is also a matter of faith. When we offend, neglect or maltreat creation, we also offend, neglect and maltreat God. Reestablishing our good relationship with creation means to cooperate with God's creative work by accepting the task entrusted to us by God. Above all, this task must be performed together and in a communal manner. It is in the relationship of reciprocity between human beings, God and creation that we build our good life and our good life together and exercise our task of mediation for reconciliation. Besides, it is in daily life that we find a primary space for attitudes and behaviors aimed at transformation.

## **Exercising the task of mediation: Clues to dialogue and action in faith communities**

Although this is an important topic, we know that it is not always easy to introduce issues directly related with the ecological dimension in our faith communities. For various reasons, there will always be people who do not want to get involved. There will be people who think that ecological, political and socio environmental issues have no relation with the church. However, as we have seen, the ecological crisis, its impacts and conse-

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This is not the better life that sustains developmentalist progress. In this sense, good life involves a critique of the model, strategies and principles of development as understood from the perspective of accumulation and consumption that reduces life (in all its forms) to mere resources. It is a project of life that searches for complementarity, solidarity, harmony and reciprocity among the community of life, starting from the assumption that we are individuals, social beings and community in an intimate relationship of correspondence.



quences are also topics and commitments of faith and for that reason, it is important to discuss them in our congregations. Besides being spaces of healing and restoration, our congregations can also become resources for peace in the mediation of conflicts.

Dialogue is one of the most effective ways of dealing with situations of conflict. Actually, it is the basis of each mediation project, since it allows the stakeholders or parties involved to express themselves and work together in the search for a satisfactory solution. However, it also requires us to be open to new forms of learning, to overcome barriers and advance beyond our limitations, habits and sociocultural narratives. These new forms of learning can be expressed in concrete and collective actions and thus contribute in a more effective way to necessary changes and transformations.

With regard to changes and transformations, have you realized how difficult it is to change something, even when there is consensus that change is necessary? Why is there so much resistance to changes, even when they point to a more just path? If we look at the ecological dimension, we will see that the consequences of the crisis have already become “normal” and apparently have no impact on our views and do not impel us to change, as they should. However, our present situation as humankind calls for a mediative posture, capable of opening up spaces and enabling the search for new agreements on life together and new ways of relating in the world.

We know that the process of reconciliation can be very slow and demanding in situations of conflict. However, some tools can be helpful. One of them is mediative communication. It can be used in several situations of conflict. Mediative communication is mainly based on active listening and communication and on empathetic awareness. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that although it helps in the mediation process and contributes to the opening up of new possibilities, it does not cause changes in and of itself.<sup>4</sup>

Our task of mediation consists in announcing reconciliation, awakening for the need for a dialogue that enables the development and search for new forms of life together and of relationships between human beings and creation. It is a reflection that starts from the individual dimension and moves toward a collective consciousness that the restoration of the relations of humankind with creation is necessary and must be understood as a faith commitment. Just as the body of Christ is made up of diverse members and each one of them has the same importance for the body to operate (1 Cor12:12-30), we are part of a whole body that only works

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<sup>4</sup> Colin Craig, *Navigating Conflict and Change: DPC Handbook Part 1*, 2019, p. 91.

together. Our survival, as well as the survival of future generations, depends on the good relationships we establish in the present. It will also involve the development of specific and collective actions designed to reduce damage and the negative impacts that we produce as humankind on the planet.

The multi-form and diversity of the body of Christ call us to learn to deal with diversity, to value and respect each individual in their specificity and to understand that differences are important. More than that, it calls us to understand that our human diversity is just a small part of the ecological diversity that makes life possible.

We have already seen that dialogue is fundamental to establish a mediative communication. In light of that, we propose a work structure applied in study groups in faith communities and adapted to the most diverse topics and sociocultural contexts. In the attempt to develop and enhance our mediation skills, our suggestion is that the topics be introduced in the community space to foster a common dialogue, reflection and consciousness-raising. The proposal is based on the seeing-judging-acting-celebrating methodology, which is why it is broken down in four moments:

- 1. Moment of listening.** This initial movement is very important for mediative communication. Through active listening, people are invited to listen to each other's feelings and experiences. To facilitate the process, questions designed to stimulate dialogue can be very useful at this moment. For example, what do we know about the ecological crisis and socio environmental conflicts? How do they affect and affect our lives? What are the practical experiences we have had with them?
- 2. Moment of biblical-theological reflection.** This is the moment to connect our knowledge about the topic with the Bible and to explore theological language. A Bible text can be used as reference and starting point for reflection.
- 3. Moment of action.** This is the space to develop perspectives and define commitments that can be taken on individually and collectively. People are invited to link their daily reality with the topic and commit themselves to concrete and viable actions. Here are some questions that may stimulate dialogue: What can we do in view of the ecological crisis? What are the viable commitments we can take on? Are there already established actions on which I can count or to which we can contribute?
- 4. Moment of spirituality.** Restoring relationships also involves acknowledging our sin and guilt. Celebration plays a very important role in this

methodology, as it enables healing and restoration of broken relationships, brings us closer to God and strengthens our spirituality. At this moment, liturgical resources can be great allies.

This methodology will enable the insertion of the topic in the faith communities and the joint exercise of the skills of mediative communication. Of utmost importance is opening up space for empathetic listening, reflection and dialogue. God's project for humankind has always been a world of peace, justice and good relationships. Our task of mediation also includes maintaining hope and making it possible for the project of love to be transformed into actions that can serve as an example and mobilize other people on the path of reconciliation.

## **Conclusion**

We have to acknowledge that the road from conflict to reconciliation is a long one. The steps are slow and must take into account the time necessary to take them. However, they must be constant and taken together, by the whole community, with a lot of listening, openness to dialogue and mutual respect, in the certainty that the Holy Spirit accompanies us, shows us the way and leads to reconciliation.

As a church, the body of Christ, we are called to announce the reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of life in fullness for all people who want to hear it. At some moments, announcing this good news also requires uttering a word of judgment and denunciation of our own behavior and acknowledging our condition as sinners. We are called to announce the good news of Jesus Christ and to denounce what is not right. Above all, we are called to keep our hearts open to the word of God.

The ecological crisis has been showing that our way of life and the choices we make as humankind have considerably affected the foundations that sustain our own survival. If we do not change our attitudes toward creation, life on the planet will be closer to its end. We are responsible for a process of change that may lead us to a different horizon, to a future that respects and guarantees dignity and life in fullness. Not only to human beings, to the whole of God's creation, a future that allows the good life and good life together in community, where we can live in a reconciled and holistic way. This is part of our task and our calling.

In light of what we have seen so far, it is not hard to imagine that we are facing a great challenge. It is through listening, dialogue and our mediative action that we participate here and now in God's project and help to construct the kingdom announced by Jesus Christ to all people.

## Blessed Are the Peacemakers

Mediative dialogue is fundamental to make it possible that, in situations of conflict, people have, with respect and dignity, the opportunity to look together for alternatives that allow the resolution and restoration of their relationships with themselves, with other people, with God and with the totality of creation. The gospel teaches and calls us to this task. Luther used to say that we have to become little Christs to other people. Now more than ever, we also must become little Christs to the totality of creation.





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