

Christians in conflict - The church as peacemaker

An in-depth case study from North East India

1. Summary

The goal of this case study is to show how influential national church representatives were able to bring reconciliation between two Christian communities that were in conflict. They mobilised local pastors who in turn mobilised their churches and communities to put pressure on the political and military wings of both fighting groups to reach a peaceful settlement.

2. Level of intervention

- Church. The levels of intervention ranged from national leaders of church networks, Christian relief and development agencies, denominational heads and their representatives at state level, as well as local church pastors and their congregations.
- Government. This involved interaction with political leaders, the police, military and civil servants.
- Underground military groups. This involved intervention with the groups' political wings and their military commanders.

3. Prospective users of the case study

Prospective users of the case study could be national church leaders whose communities are fighting each other, as well as third party groups which are in a position to help initiate a peace process.

4. Problem addressed

On 24 June 1997, in Saikul village, ten miles outside Churachandpur in Manipur State, north-east India, ten Paite villagers from the Zomi tribal group were lined up and shot by an underground gang from the Kuki tribe. The next day the Zomi retaliated, killing innocent Kukis and burning their houses. This began a period of terror that lasted over six months. It featured raids, torture, bombings, curfews, barricades and an overall breakdown in the fabric of society, as one group sought revenge and dominance over the other. There were 450 confirmed deaths and many other lives unaccounted for. Six thousand houses were destroyed and property valued at an estimated five hundred million rupees was lost.

5. Purpose of the peace negotiators

The purpose of the peace negotiators was to end the violence and achieve reconciliation between the two communities.

6. Context

Ethnically, politically and militarily the context of north-east India is very complex. The hills of north-east India are populated by many ethnic groups, linked to each other by a common history, yet distinct in dialect, language and customs. The Kuki and the Zomi group of sub-tribes (the Paite, Vaiphei and Simte) are close, but remain distinct. The origin of this dispute lay in the fact that the Kukis had been fighting another tribal group, the Nagas, and as a result many were forced to flee their lands. Initially, these internally displaced Kukis were supported by the Zomi when they moved to Churachandpur District, but as time went on their presence became an irritation and eventually a threat. The Kukis, because of their fighting history, had a militia; the Zomi did not. This led to the militia harassing and intimidating the local Zomi, demanding money contributions. When the Zomi eventually resisted, the militia became violent.

Churachandpur District in Manipur State, which experienced most of the violence, has a population of 228,707, as per 2001 census. Approximately 81% are Christian and pastors are highly respected in the community.

Besides the conflict between Kuki and Zomi, a wider war of independence has been fought for many years. Most ethnic groups in this region have an underground movement fighting the Indian Government and its military, but also in many cases, fighting one another. Although the goal is independence, the reality is that their activities lead to harassment and extortion of the people whose cause they are supposed to support. This means that the Indian military still need to be present in the region.

Challenges and constraints of the local church

When violence erupted, the churches and their members were also affected by the atmosphere of anger, fear, grief and distrust. The church leadership from neither the Kuki nor Zomi were able to bring about peace. However, senior people from both groups who lived and worked *outside* Manipur State, along with other national church leaders and NGO personnel, came together to think through a strategy for peace. They were representatives from the North East India Committee on Relief and Development (NEICORD), the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India (CBCNEI), the Evangelical Fellowship of India Relief Commission (EFICOR), World Vision, the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) and the Roman Catholic Archbishopric for North East India. These leaders formed what was to be called the Core Committee on Peace and Reconciliation (CCPR) for the Churachandpur area.

7. Steps in implementation

1. Delivery of relief aid

As soon as they were granted access, NEICORD and World Vision, which are both relief and development agencies, delivered emergency supplies to the worst-affected areas. The selection of beneficiaries had to be done with sensitivity and with the full co-operation of the local leadership at political, para-military and church levels.

2. Gaining the trust of local church leaders to build a commitment for peace

Representatives from each ethnic group were selected and invited to a Reconciliation Consultation.

- Ten pastors from the Kuki and ten from the Zomi were invited
- Ten people from the neutral, yet closely related, tribes also attended
- The consultation was run by CBCNEI and EFICOR. Their senior staff were Kuki and Zomi but importantly they were based outside the conflict region. There were also other resource people with experience of peace and reconciliation matters.
- The consultation was held outside the area of conflict and on the premises of the North East Diocese Social Forum, Kharguli in Guwahati.

Format of the discussions

Each day began and ended with every participant meeting for Bible study and prayer.

Day 1: Morning

In separate locations the Kuki and Zomi groups were asked to write down what they thought were the reasons behind the present troubles. The neutral group spent time considering how they could contribute to the peace process, as well as praying for its successful outcome. They acted as mediators when discussions between the Kuki and Zomi groups broke down.

Day 1: Afternoon

The same groups were asked what the likely solutions to this crisis could be.

Day 2: Morning

In one forum, and in front of all 30 participants, the answers of both groups to both sets of questions were written up on a white board. To the surprise of many, there was a significant overlap. At this point participants were invited to add anything that had been missed.

Day 2: Afternoon

In separate groups, each was asked to prioritise the solutions, as well as identify the non-negotiable criteria from the negotiable. The non-negotiable ones naturally came to the top of the priorities.

Day 3: Morning

Each group reported back and they found that the demands on each side were similar. The common conclusion was that people should only fight in self-defence.

Day 3: Afternoon

It was agreed that carrying out a Hiamkhamna ceremony should be the goal to which all parties should strive. It would mean the leaders of the two factions sharing a feast, an act that binds them to an oath of protection of one another. By the end of the workshop there was a commitment among the pastors of both communities to resolve the conflict. Both groups were encouraged to set up peace cells back in their communities, as well as engage their churches in peace-building activities.

Follow-up meetings

The core group met immediately after this consultation and proposed to hold another meeting but this time in the state capital of Manipur, Imphal, to which a wider group of church and social leaders would be called. The aim was to build on the achievements of this first meeting and widen the ownership of a peace-building process. As a result the Inter Church Peace Committee (CCPR) was formed. Many meetings followed.

Challenges and constraints of the local church

3. Supporting the local pastors in mobilising the local people for peace

In a communication from the CCPR all churches were asked to demonstrate their commitment to peace by:

Fasting and praying

- Setting aside one day to fast and pray for peace.
- Fasting from morning until evening on specific days and to pray regularly until a ceasefire was achieved.

Demonstrating

- Moving on to the streets to demonstrate for peace. Women's groups were strongly motivated to do this.
- For a group of 30 Kuki pastors this meant dressing in sackcloth and ashes, and walking the streets asking for forgiveness of sins.

Doing church leader exchanges

- Pastors from the two groups were invited to speak at each other's churches. They spoke of the need to forgive one another and emphasised that both communities belonged to the one Gospel of Jesus Christ, who had reconciled all men to himself.

4. Contacting those promoting violence

Identification

Pastors were asked to identify those who had influence with leaders of the underground military movements and also those who were co-ordinating the fighting from a distance. Some of these were pastors themselves.

Persuasion

Selected members of the CCPR's core team visited these people of influence to press for a ceasefire. They asked for this so that relief goods could be delivered to the people, as well as convincing them that there would be no winners in such a conflicts, only losers – and the losers would be the ordinary people from their communities.

Access

Guarantees of safety were eventually given to selected members of the core team to visit the military commanders in their hideouts. The Kuki had three underground units: the Kuki National Front (KNF), the Military Command (MC) and the Kuki National Army (KNA), each with a history of mutual rivalry. It took many meetings with them before they agreed to allow their political wing, the Kuki Inpi, to negotiate a ceasefire on their behalf. The Zomi Revolutionary army stood alone and had no rivals. However, it too was reluctant to agree to a ceasefire, because it felt that for the first time it had the military advantage over the Kuki. Eventually it agreed for its political wing, the Zomi Council, to engage in negotiations.

Ceasefire

The first Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for a ceasefire was signed on 26 March 1998, nine months after the violence first broke out. Three extensions to the MOU were agreed until eventually on 1 October 1998, 15 months later, a permanent ceasefire was signed by all parties.

5. Involving the established political representatives in sealing a peace agreement

New agenda

Throughout the conflict, the government pursued its own peace initiatives but without success. Handing over the peace agreements from the CCPR to the government was not easy. The political agendas were different. Also the language and motive for peace as used by the CCPR in the declaration was too Christian. This had to be translated into acceptable legal wording before being presented to the conflicting parties.

Ending the violence

The government then took the initiative to call the key members of the groups together to officially end the violence. The Hiamkhamna was carried out with the state governor present on two different occasions. Since that time, there has been no return to the violence along communal lines.

8. Duration

24 June 1997 – 25 December 1998

9. Resources required for the practice

Material resources

- Funds to be able to mount a peace initiative; transportation and accommodation costs for negotiators.
- Neutral venues to hold discussions.
- Relief supplies to support the worst-affected people in the community.

Challenges and constraints of the local church

Other resources

- A common Christian heritage that allows the negotiators to draw both factions into shared values of peace and reconciliation in Christ.
- The high status of the pastor in tribal culture and the authority that this position has to mobilise congregations and the community.
- The power of prayer: the power generated by the church leaders exchange initiative and the symbolic public acts of repentance.
- The pressure brought about by women's groups who reached out to women from the other party to encourage peace.
- The credibility, in the eyes of all parties, of those who initiated the peace negotiations.
- People with influence over the underground movements who were open to discussion and who were willing to let the negotiators have access to the military leaders.
- A unified and authoritative military command structure that can make effective decisions about peace.
- The status and neutrality of the Roman Catholic bishop who offered premises and his authority throughout the peace process

10. Indicators for monitoring

- The creation of a core team of pastors from both groups, committed to one another and to a commonly-agreed peace process.
- The commitment among their congregations for peace, shown by prayer, fasting, demonstrations and church leader exchanges.
- Identification and engagement of key figures with influence over the underground movement.
- Access to and negotiations with those who control the fighting on the ground.
- An end to the violence.
- Peaceful interaction between the conflicting communities.

11. Impact

- A ceasefire was agreed and a peace agreement signed, which allowed a gradual restoration of infrastructure in Churachandpur District and reconciliation between the two tribal communities.
- Although no attempts were made to establish a 'peace and reconciliation' process and no one was put on trial for atrocities, there has been no outbreak of violent conflict between the two tribal groups since the ceasefire in 1998.

12. Challenges

- Accessing the troubled areas, either to deliver relief or to carry out negotiations, because the area was divided into so many military and political territories.
- Providing an opportunity for pastors from both tribal groups to listen and not accuse one another in the reconciliation consultation.
- Securing ongoing funding for the relief and peace initiatives.
- Having key national negotiators released from their jobs so they could give prolonged and meaningful time to setting up a peace process.
- Finding people willing to take on this work, due to the risk of death often faced by these negotiators.
- Negotiating with a military wing that had a divided command.
- Helping pastors and church congregations to realise that the church cuts across cultural and tribal boundaries.
- Overcoming the obstacle created by the fact that some pastors and influential Christians openly supported their respective military wings. Some had even blessed guns!

13. Critical issues and lessons learnt

- **The importance of relief as a first step**
This was the first sign to people in the affected areas that others cared about them and that they had not been forgotten. It laid the foundation for NEICORD's future key role in the peace-building process.
- **The credibility of the negotiators**
 - The CCPR's core team were all pastors from Churachandpur District, who knew each other from their student days there.
 - The two key negotiators from the two conflicting tribal groups had also had their properties destroyed in the conflict. They were known and respected by the local church leaders. These negotiators suffered personal losses but were distant from the conflict as they worked outside the area with national relief and development organisations during this period.

Challenges and constraints of the local church

- The neutral position of the Roman Catholic bishop and his willingness to offer the use of his premises and his position to assist the peace process.
- **The use of a traditional and mutually-recognised ritual (the Hiamkhamna) to cement the agreement.** The use of a traditional ceasefire ritual was very significant in cementing the peace process, as it was a ritual that everyone understood and valued, even strongly evangelical pastors. It gave greater credence and seriousness to the agreement that was made.
- **Unified military command.** Peace is easier if there is one command, not several.
- **Equal strength.** Military commanders are more likely to agree to a ceasefire if it seems that neither side will win in the near future.
- **The power of women for peace.** Harnessing women's support was a key motivator for peace. Men occupied the seats at the negotiation tables, but it was the support from church women's groups that moved the peace process on.
- **Stopping the violence.** Once this was achieved, life became peaceful. People enjoyed the freedom of movement and freedom from fear that this brought and did not want a return to the fighting and curfews.
- **Language.** It is very important to conduct negotiations in a number of languages. Skilled and trusted interpreters or bi- and tri-linguists are essential.

14. Potential for replication

The approach outlined in this case study can best be replicated in contexts where:

- Christian values form the basis of society's values.
- The church has power and pastors have status.
- Influential and respected Christians are willing to negotiate for peace and ready to count the cost in time and personal safety.
- Militia commanders and their political wings can see no victory in sight.
- The context is relatively free of outside powers using the conflict as a substitute war.

15. Sources of information

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2. NEICORD
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3. CBCNEI
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4. Tearfund
 - Bob Hansford, Former Project Officer, NE India, Tearfund
5. NEICORD Minutes
 - Peace and Reconciliation Initiative, Churachandpur District, Manipur

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