

Christians in conflict - The church as peacemaker

A brief case study from North East India

Introduction

How do you bring about peace when even pastors have blessed weapons? This was one of the many challenges facing a small group of Christians and senior churchmen from north-east India as they began their peacemaking mission. These peace negotiators were drawn from both of the communities in conflict, the Kukis and the Zomis, and, as senior church leaders, shared in the losses, resentment and anger of their respective tribes over what had been happening since 24 June 1997. On that day, 11 Zomis were killed by a Kuki militia and reprisals between the two communities followed for six months. There was a total breakdown of law and order, hundreds were killed, houses were burnt, and curfews and barricades blocked the flow of normal life in the centre of the conflict, Churachandpur District in the state of Manipur. A hundred years ago, both these communities were animist and head-hunters: they had converted to Christianity to become Baptists and Presbyterians. The church leaders met in December 1997. By October the next year, largely through their efforts, a permanent ceasefire had been sealed.

Aims

The aim of the peace negotiators was to bring about a cessation of violence and achieve reconciliation between the two communities.

Steps in the process

Over the period of conflict, the group took the following steps:

1. **Relief.** In the worst affected areas, normal trading had stopped, ghettos had formed, and basic commodities had become scarce. The first step taken by the peace negotiators was to distribute food and clothing. This was done at considerable risk to those involved. It helped to establish credibility for the negotiators within the affected communities. It was their agencies that organised the distributions.
2. **Local church pastors.** Then came the task of winning over a core of influential pastors from both tribal groups in the Churachandpur District, who would be committed to pursuing peace. These pastors were among those whose congregations and communities had benefited from the relief work.
3. **Mobilising congregations.** Once these pastors were on board, it was then a case of supporting them to manage the bitterness and tensions within their own congregations, where lives had been lost and property destroyed. They needed support to help mobilise their people to call for peace.
4. **Accessing the men of violence.** The militias continued to kill and cause terror. A ceasefire would only come about if they too agreed to uphold it. Contacting the men of violence proved problematic and could only be done through middlemen. Once they had been identified, they had to be convinced that it was worth their militia commanders talking to the negotiators.
5. **Negotiating with the military commanders.** There were many military commanders. The Kukis alone had three military wings, all of whom were vying against each other. After much negotiation, they all eventually agreed to hand over negotiations to their political wings.
6. **Involving the state government.** Permanent peace could only be established with the authority of the state to back it. To seal an agreement, the negotiators handed over the process to the government authorities.

Impact

A ceasefire was agreed and a peace agreement signed. This allowed a gradual restoration of infrastructure in Churachandpur District and the start of reconciliation between the two tribal communities. Although this has proved a long and ongoing process, there has been no violent conflict since the ceasefire.

Lessons learnt

- **The importance of relief as a first step.** This was the first sign to people in the besieged areas that others cared about them and they had not been forgotten.
- **The credibility of the peacemakers.** They need to have authority in the local community and their motives have to be seen to be above reproach. The negotiators had established relationships in the community prior to the conflict; the pastors were known to be men of honour.

Case studies in brief

- **The power of women for peace.** The men may have sat at the negotiating table, but the engine for peace came from women's groups who prayed and demonstrated in the streets.
- **Unified military commands.** Peace is easier to obtain if there is one military command and not a number of splintered groups.
- **Parity of strength.** Military commanders are more likely to agree to a ceasefire if there is no prospect of victory for them in the foreseeable future.
- **Get the ceasefire!** Once this was achieved, peace began to be the norm. People enjoyed the freedom of movement and absence of 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 and be very aware of nuances of language. Skilled and trusted interpreters or bi- and tri-lingual negotiators are essential.
- **The 'Hiamkhamna'.** Hiam is weapon/tool especially an iron tool; khamna means stop – so the two joined together mean 'ceasefire'. Despite these communities being predominantly Christian and their pastors having a strong evangelical faith, they found significant meaning in a ritual performed by their forefathers, namely the Hiamkhamna, that would strengthen a peace deal.

Conclusion

The church can be an effective peace-maker in contexts where two Christian communities are in conflict. Influential national church representatives from both Christian communities can mobilise local pastors. They in turn can mobilise their churches and communities to put pressure on the political and military wings of fighting groups to settle for peace.

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 proxy war.

[Click here for a more detailed version of this case study.](#)

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