

The Fellowship of Christian Councils and the Quest for Peace in the African Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa

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Abstract

For quite long the region known as the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa has continued to degenerate into a scene of conflicts and violence. Conflicts and violence in this region have become a legacy that reproduces itself in subsequent generations as the conditions that nurtured it in the previous generations are allowed to continue. The vision of the Fellowship of the Christian Councils in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa (hereafter to be known as Fellowship) is the creation of communities founded on the Christian principles of freedom, justice and peace. In this paper the author argues that:

- (i) Conflicts and violence are preventable.*
- (ii) The Fellowship should have both a special interest and a key role to play in conflict management in Africa.*

Introduction

I am profoundly grateful for the privilege extended to me to give a short address during the 3rd World Forum on Theology and Liberation, 2009 meeting. In the light of this year's theme **Water, Earth, and Theology - for another possible World**, it is my honor and joy to present a paper on a topic that greatly affects our being as Christians in the present day African Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa namely, **The Fellowship of Christian Councils and the Quest for peace in the African Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa**

Since the beginning of the twentieth century the African Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa have been involved in civil wars, inter-state conflicts and violence. Many people in the region have lost their lives as a result of conflicts and violence.¹

The conflicts and violence in the African Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa have to be understood against the background of ethnic/tribal conflicts and state formation that have proved to be life-threatening issues in this region. Other life-threatening issues such as globalization and ecological disaster have brought about

¹ Of the countries in this region, it is only Tanzania that has avoided such a crisis.



a fast growing realization that the National Christian Councils in this region have relevance only to the extent that they can work together for the good of humanity. It is in reaction to such life-threatening issues that the Fellowship of the Christian Councils in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa has gained growing support in the region.²

The vision of the Fellowship is to create communities that are founded on the Christian principles of justice, peace and freedom.

The position of the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa

The Fellowship came into existence against the background of long-standing conflicts in the region. The story of these conflicts began in 1884 with the Berlin Conference when European powers decided to share Africa among themselves. In order to avoid clashes with one another, they created spheres of influence which are part of the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa's ecumenical story. This ecumenical story has revealed that this region is in a crisis stage. Many people in this part of Africa have lived under difficult circumstances for a very long time as a result of conflicts and violence. Conflicts in this region intensify year after year. For instance, in the recent past there have been wars in countries like Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda.³

The National Christian Councils in this region are faced with many challenges that are posed by conflicts and violence. It is the pressures of this century which have demanded that National Council of Churches in this region mobilize the resources of the church for peace through the Fellowship. The Fellowship's focus is on:

- i. Critically examining the root cause of the ongoing culture of conflict and violence in the region.
- ii. Critically analyzing the plight of this region that continues to degenerate into a scene of conflicts and violence.
- iii. Provoking its audience to think how to deter the prevalence of violent conflicts and how to resolve disagreements before they reach crisis stage.

² The National Council of Churches' contribution to peace and stability in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa is the formation of the Fellowship of Christian Councils.

³ The Fellowship of Christian Councils in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa (FECCLAHA) based in Nairobi, was set up by the Christian Council of Tanzania, the National Council of Churches of Burundi, the National Council of Churches of Kenya, the Protestant Council of Rwanda, the Sudan Council of Churches, the New Sudan Council of Churches, the Uganda Joint Christian Council, the Church of Christ in Congo, the Eritrea Orthodox Church and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea.



The Fellowship argues that the resort to violence is not part of the African nature rather is a result of historical conditioning, a phenomenon that can be reverted by various National Council of Churches working together. The above mentioned agenda for the Fellowship is a sign of hope and peace, but there is more to be done in the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa if this part of Africa is to be “another possible world.”

The way forward for the Fellowship

People who are convinced about the positive role the Fellowship is playing are tempted into presenting the Fellowship as offering solutions in spite of all the historical evidence that Christianity in this region is often seen as a significant cause of conflicts and violence. The way forward, therefore, is not as easy as many people would want to think.

The challenge is how can the task of dialogue make headway, so that the Fellowship can become the effective force for peace which so many people in the region proclaim it to be? The Fellowship needs to prepare herself thoroughly for the ministry of reconciliation in situations of conflicts and violence. This could be achieved by:

- i. Identifying itself with the cries and struggles of the ordinary people in concrete and tangible ways in their day-to-day concerns. In most cases priority is given to dealing with the immediate consequences of conflicts and violence by providing support to the victims of violence. While such a response is important and should be encouraged wherever possible, there needs to be much more than that.
- ii. Making people aware that conflicts and violence are predictable and preventable. In a region that yearns for meaningful change and progress, the Fellowship should not sit back and be content with lively Sunday worship services. It must subject that reality to the demands of peace and reconciliation.

In order to be involved in meaningful reconciliation, the Fellowship must recognize two basic things:

- a. True reconciliation presupposes the establishment of conditions for justice. There cannot be peace in situations of conflicts unless the



injustices that underlie the existing conflicts are resolved to the satisfaction of the actors.

- b. Reconciliation presupposes change of individuals and circumstances that foster and nurture conflicts. Unless change is experienced, fear, manipulation and conflicts become intensified.

- iii. Getting rid of centuries of negative baggage. A lot of people in this region have accumulated centuries of baggage where they tend to remember the bad times and use them as weapons against each other in times of conflicts.

Conclusion

Is a new world possible for the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa? A meaningful answer depends on whether the Fellowship as a cause of reconciliation will take itself out political relations and insert itself as a factor for reconciliation.

