

# **The Church and Multicultural Ministry: Experiences of the Protestant Church in the Moluccas**

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I come from the Moluccas, the region rocked by social conflicts involving the Moslem and Christian people for about five years. It was one of the most terrible experiences that the people in this region went through. Thousands of people lost their lives; public and personal belongings were destroyed. But the worst is that the social relationship among people of various religious communities was badly broken. Of course even before the conflict started, there had been a lot of mistrust and prejudices which developed among diverse religious communities towards one another. As I see it, this has a lot to do with our historical and religious background.

During the conflicts, for example, our Moslem sisters and brothers always recalled the old days saying that Christians had been enjoying great privileges during the western colonial era. So it is just natural that they reclaim their rights now as the majority community in Indonesia. For their part, the Christians also blamed the Moslem for having been granted special privileges during the New Order era.

I also see the need to destroy traditional theology which presents other religions as enemy. Such a theology has a lot to do with our religious teachings which tend to be exclusive and triumphalistic, putting us over and against the other.

Another thing I see is the social and economic injustices which also contributed a lot to the conflict. KKN (which stands for the Bahasa Indonesian words for corruption, collusion, nepotism) which is practiced in society at all levels create a lot of dissatisfaction among common people who are easily manipulated by parties with vested interests (politically and economically) for their own benefit and this easily brings about conflict. Much analysis has been done on this but the fact remains that a lot of suffering and tragedy have befallen upon the common people.

## **Being Church amidst Violence and Conflicts**

### ***Shifting violence to non-violent actions***

In my experience, retaliating to violence with violence is the greatest temptation when the Church's existence is threatened. This was what the Christian people in the Moluccas did. That's why in the first two years of the conflicts it was very hard to stop the violence committed among the Christians. Many felt that retaliation is justified in the Bible: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth (Matthew 5:38). It was to combat traditional theology

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of retributive justice that the Protestant Church in the Moluccas embarked on its policy of non-violence. For that the Church owed its theological basis in Jesus' own teaching: "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Mt. 5:39b). Of course this teaching creates mixed responses from the congregation. In order to defend their standpoint, some people said that what they are faced with is not striking on their cheeks but the possibility of losing their heads; and they don't have two heads to offer them. They tend to feel that non-violence is a sign of weakness. But that doesn't necessarily mean so. The Linns, in their book, *Don't Forget Too Soon* (Indonesian edition, *Don't Forgive Too Soon*, Jakarta: Penerbit Obor, 2002, pp. 4-6) help us to understand that this is Jesus' way of resisting violence non-violently. In order to strike the right cheek, one needs to use the back of one's hand. This gesture is used only by those who considered themselves superior towards the subordinate to humiliate her/him. The message conveyed here is: remember your position, you are under my power. If one gives one's left cheek, one is forcing the boss to use his/her right hand. If he/she wants to hit you again he/she has to use his/her fist. To hit somebody with fist is a gesture used only by those who are of the same social position. So by giving one's left cheek one has got back one's honor while affirming that one resists from being humiliated. This is what we mean by non-violent resistance. This model of resistance was also adopted by Martin Luther King Jr.

As shown earlier, taking the biblical text literally brings a lot of problem to the church. The Protestant Church in the Moluccas was very conscious of the danger of this kind of Bible reading, because it justifies violence against those who are considered outsiders of the church boundaries. It is in this connection that we developed and are still developing among our congregation the program which many of us call "Reading the Bible with New Eyes". In doing this we try to promote sisterhood and brotherhood among people based on biblical reading, learning from our experience of violence, of enmity and hatred among people of different religions in the Moluccas. We believe that our traditional theology is not life oriented, because it leads to so much prejudice, suspicions and mistrust, which in turn could breed hatred, violence and terror. We believe that what happened in the Moluccas more or less has also stemmed from this theology. Or at least this kind of theology has contributed to the development of prejudice and mistrust towards different faith communities. Even our Sunday school children were being educated in this line of theological perspectives. Such negative sentiments towards other religions could easily be manipulated by other parties with different interests and easily used to provoke people of differences into violence.

Hence, we feel an urgent need to reorient our theology, if possible to correct it, so that instead of enhancing mistrust and prejudice it could promote love and respect among various people and communities and bring healing to our community. One of the main programs decided by the church in the year 2001, when the Moluccan conflict was still at its peak, was theological renewal, which attempted to construct a theology which focuses on building peace, justice, equality among humankind and sisterhood and brotherhood relationship among all people. We called it "the pro life theology", which sees life as having its source in God, therefore it must be seriously protected and preserved and its quality enhanced. Our theological faculty is doing a lot of work along this line of theological endeavor, helping young people who are preparing themselves to be pastors in the church to reorient their theological perspectives. We hope the new output of the

faculty could bring further renewal and transformation theologically to the whole church in time. We also invite pastors who have been working for some time in congregations, especially those with no theological degrees, to refresh their theological formation for the same purpose and also to gain first degree in theology.

### **Relationship with People of Other Faith Communities**

Although our experience of conflicts which involved the Moslem and Christian communities has caused a lot of pain to both communities, yet it also teaches us, especially the church, to review and renew our relationship with people of other faith communities. If in the past, we entertained a lot of exclusive and discriminative attitude towards others who are different from us, claiming our religion to be the one that owns the whole divine truth, by doing so we also looked down on other religions, often treating them as objects of our missionary activities. Nowadays a more open and friendly attitude is being developed towards other religions, not just for the sake of stopping violence from recurring in our society, but for the sake of building true reconciliation among sisters and brothers of the same tribe. In this relation I should say that the Moluccan cultural tradition has a lot to contribute to this. What is meant here is the belief of our ancient tribal tradition which traces our origin to the same place, a certain Mount Nunusaku on the Ceram Island. This makes us all sisters and brothers of the same tribe, irrespective of our religious belief. It is in the same breath that we profess our Christian belief that we all are created by the same God, who created us not uniformly but each differently and uniquely, which makes us all sisters and brothers of the same family of God. In other words, as a church, we are more open to plurality, acknowledging it not only as a social reality but also as a theological truth. We believe that plurality is part of God's design of creation, and therefore we can not but celebrate our differences including our religious and cultural differences. By celebrating it we become more sensitive to the riches contained in each different element of the plural society, and are able to learn from each other and be enriched by it. By celebrating it we also learn that to be different is not a sin to be punished, neither is it a reason to be suspicious about, but it is a beauty designed by God's own hands.

Based on this realization, more and more programs are being designed and conducted along with communities of other faiths, especially with our Moslem sisters and brothers, in order to get closer to one another, to foster friendship and reconciliation by addressing prejudices and mistrust that we have been having against each other. It is in this line of thinking that the Protestant Church in the Moluccas, along with the Roman Catholic Bishopric and the Islamic Ulama Conference (MUI), started the Inter Religious Forum in the Moluccas, which is now actively engaged in the process of reconciliation, and in trust and peace building activities. The same activities are being conducted by the women's groups, which actually started much earlier. I should also make mention of the Master of Theology Program done in the Theological Faculty, in the Christian University, Moluccas. The important factor is that we are also inviting Moslem students to be enrolled in the program and quite a great number of them are joining. It is a real good experience to have Moslem students to study Christian theology; some of them are women who attend courses with complete Moslem attire. We are also inviting Islamic teachers to come and teach Islam in the same program. Although questions and doubts are being raised within the Christian community itself, we still believe this is one of the ways to foster understanding

and friendship among different communities. Only by understanding each other better could we become better friends later. By studying together we also hope to bring religion as a source of peace and not as a source of violence and conflicts. We have learnt our lesson the hardest way, where religions were used as tools to instigate and prolong conflicts. We need to reposition it back as a source of inspiration for sisterhood and brotherhood of all humankind.

### **The Sense of Justice**

We also discovered that another dominant factor which greatly contributed to the Moluccan conflicts was the loss of a sense of justice among the people. The Moslem community felt that they were treated unjustly long way back, during the colonial time, because at that time Christians were given more privileges by the colonial rulers. Hence, they think that the Moslems still suffer from a setback until presently. But the Christians also accused the Moslems of enjoying the same kind of treatment from the Indonesian government during the New Order Era. So both sides feel the same sense of injustice has been done to them by the government. As I see it, the social, economic and political injustice experienced by people at the grassroots level, coupled with persistent prejudices and suspicions, are best elements to start the fire of conflicts. Nowadays in Indonesia, the same elements persist. In the Moluccan case, problems of the IDP (Internally Displaced People) due to the conflicts are still looming large because some are being left unattended. So is the social economic gap which is widening due to the unjust economic and social structure, which has driven more people into poverty and unemployment. Also the law enforcement which is not being carried out responsibly, have caused a lot of dissatisfaction among people. Actually, such issues were given priority during the Malino Agreement between the Christian, Moslem and the Government representatives. Both sides have voiced their concern about the social, economic and political injustices which are being practiced in the country and concerns were raised whether the government can take care of the matter in all seriousness. Well, there are some things that were taken care of but some others are not seriously treated. This is still a matter of concern for the church as a whole, not only for the sake of conflict prevention but especially as a divine call "to make justice flow like a river" (Amos 5:24).

In the face of all kinds of injustice seen in our society, the Protestant Church in its effort to carry out God's mission in the world, speaks strongly against the religious practices which are mainly focused on rituals, and leading people to think of salvation in heaven and in the life hereafter than addressing the real social, economic problems that people are really encountering. Such practices are very popular now especially with the growth of the revival movements of religions. The Protestant Church in the Moluccas is taking this problem seriously and making it a point that the life of the human being should become the main focus of our witness and service. Of course having concern for life hereafter is not something we should reject completely, but the tendency to build spirituality which is inward-looking is strongly admonished by the revival movements. Yet, in the current situation where social and economic injustice is so prevalent in the country, the church can not but show real concern for and address the social problems seriously. That is why in the Protestant Church in the Moluccas we talk a lot about developing a spirituality for

social renewal and pro-life.

Of course, all that have been said and planned is not as easily implemented. A number of people in the church do not agree with all this renewal process. There are also people who suffer from trauma related to conflicts so that the old prejudices, suspicions and even hatred are still alive in their hearts. Therefore, there is a great need also to tend to the