



Pursuing Peace and Reconciliation

BY STUART MURRAY WILLIAMS

I am grateful for the invitation to reflect and give examples of how the 5 Marks of Mission are engaged with in my own setting. This is an opportunity to step back and think about how initiatives in which I am involved relate to these aspects of the *missio Dei*.

As I have done this, I discovered that several quite different activities all connect with one particular mark of mission.

In 2012, the Anglican Consultative Council added some additional wording to the well-established and

widely accepted 'Five Marks of Mission' document, namely, 'to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation.' Arguably, this dimension of mission is significant enough to be regarded as a sixth mark of mission, rather than being appended to a statement about



seeking to ‘transform unjust structures of society’, but it is encouraging to find peacemaking included within this revised document.

One of the most troubling legacies of the Christendom era is the frequent collusion of the church with violence – legitimating judicial violence, blessing the weapons of war, issuing calls to crusade, persecuting dissidents, displaying military insignia in church buildings, supporting colonial oppression, and much else. If ‘challenging violence’ is indeed endorsed as a mark of mission, acknowledgement of this legacy, repentance and perhaps also some form of restitution might be an appropriate starting point. The demise of Christendom is an opportunity to address this issue and embark on a new course.

One of the reasons I have situated myself within the Anabaptist tradition for the past forty years is its resolute commitment over the past five hundred years to non-violence and, more recently, to active peacemaking and ministries of reconciliation.[1] Along with the Quakers, Anabaptists are representatives of the ‘historic peace church’ tradition that has witnessed against the church’s collusion with violence and has explored ways of developing ‘peace churches’ and creative methods to challenge injustice. It is this tradition that has helped to expose and challenge the ‘myth of redemptive violence’[2] that permeates our culture and, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, continues to undergird violent and coercive strategies and practices in supposed pursuit of peace and justice.



A commitment to peace in an unjust and violent world requires action to ‘transform unjust structures of society’, promoting and incarnating peaceful transformative practices. One of these to which Anabaptists have made a formative contribution is the practice of restorative justice. The retributive approach that dominates the criminal justice system, incarcerates huge numbers of people at massive cost, marginalises the victims of crime, and mostly fails to prevent reoffending, is deeply flawed. A restorative approach that is victim-led and brings together those who have caused and suffered harm, offers the possibility of reconciliation and restitution, and has a much better track record of reducing reoffending, and is now available in many parts of the UK. Far from being a soft option, as critics allege, this

practice requires courage from participants and willingness to confront the issues that have led to criminality and the consequences for those affected.

Although the agencies that deliver this approach are secular, its roots are mostly in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. It is not a panacea and does not always result in a positive outcome, but as a restorative justice facilitator over the past decade, first in Bristol and now in East Kent, I have been encouraged by the capacity of this practice to bring closure, reconciliation and personal transformation. My hope is that the benefits this restorative approach offers to society, as well as to the individuals directly involved, will be increasingly recognised and will result in much needed structural changes.[3]

Pursuing peace and reconciliation is at the heart of two of the initiatives of the Anabaptist Mennonite Network. Having been involved in the founding of this Network's predecessor, the Anabaptist Network, in the early 1990s, I am encouraged by the increasing awareness of and interest in Anabaptist perspectives on missiology, ecclesiology, ethics and other areas of theology. The Anabaptist tradition is unusually well suited for our post-Christendom era and the Network offers resources for Christians and churches wrestling with the challenges of this emerging context. In addition to offering theological education, publishing the *After Christendom* series of books and encouraging the development of 'peace churches',



'the Network also supports practical peace-making initiatives.

Peaceful Borders, according to its website,[4] works to support new arrivals to the UK through helping refugee and migrant community leaders build their capacity and power to create peaceful communities and spaces through developing programmes of meaningful, refugee-led support. Having successfully supported community building and peace-making in the Calais 'Jungle', Peaceful Borders is now using this learning and working to support the community leaders who emerged in the informal camps of the 2015 refugee crisis to put their skills and learning to use in supporting those who arrive in the UK. In the context of the 'hostile environment' created by the Home Office over the past few years, pursuing peace also involves challenging and seeking to transform unjust social structures.

The second initiative is SoulSpace in

Belfast, a small Christian community based in a former Methodist Church building that is set into one of the so-called 'peace walls' – the front of the building is in a Catholic area, the back is in a Protestant area! The community draws on Anabaptist convictions and practices as it aims to break free from polarised religion in the part of the UK that still retains much of the ethos of the Christendom era. Pursuing peace and reconciliation is at the heart of the vision of this community.

If post-Christendom is encouraging some fresh thinking about issues of peace, justice and reconciliation, post-colonialism requires similar reflection and action. Christendom and colonialism were integrally linked, of course: Europeans set out to evangelise, civilise and colonise other parts of the world. European missionaries were confident that they were representatives of a superior and Christian culture; were poorly equipped to differentiate between gospel and culture; and were deeply embedded in the ideology and



practices of empire and colonisation. What they exported was European Christendom. Despite the passionate commitment and often heroic service of generations of European missionaries, who sowed the seeds for the explosion of the Christian community in Africa and other parts of the Majority World, the problematic legacy of colonial Christianity is yet to be properly addressed.

Addressing this legacy is multifaceted and well beyond the scope of this article, but one issue it can address is the impact of colonialism and exported Christendom theology and practices on the capacity of Christians from the Majority World to engage effectively in mission in Europe. The movement sometimes known as 'reverse mission' (though this term is contested) has brought thousands of African, Asian and Latin American Christians to the 'dark continent' of Europe. Many of these speak of their indebtedness to those European missionaries who brought the gospel to their forebears and are passionate about sharing the gospel with secularised Europeans. Thus far, most have been effective only within their own ethnic and cultural communities – often termed 'diaspora mission' – but the pressure is growing to move beyond these. Not only is this limitation frustrating in relation to their sense of vocation, but many mono-ethnic churches are losing their younger generation and are reaching the limits of their diaspora communities.

There are reasons for this struggle: importing Christendom models into a post-Christendom society, lack of contextualisation, the reluctance of first-generation leaders to adapt what is culturally comfortable, and racism, among other factors. But these missionaries and their churches bring wonderful gifts – evangelistic passion, prayerfulness, vibrant faith, holistic community, openness to the Holy Spirit – that are desperately needed in Europe. If these gifts can be shared and the struggles can be overcome, the outcome could be of enormous significance for the future of the

church and its participation in God's mission in Europe. In recent books on this issue, missionaries from the Majority World have advocated multi-cultural churches and mission initiatives as the way forward and have urged partnership as the model.[5] Authentic partnership between the heirs of the colonised and the colonisers will require mutual grace, humility and a commitment to 'pursuing peace and reconciliation' in order to 'transform unjust structures' in church and society.

One small contribution I have offered into this is the Black Light course, run by the mission agency I coordinate, Urban Expression, and the Ascension Trust.[6] Les Isaac and I first ran this course in London in the late 1990s and revived it in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in the USA. Now an online course, it is running for the third time in summer 2022 and, given the interest it has sparked, will likely run again in the autumn. The course invites Black and White Christians to discover more about African and Caribbean Christianity, the contributions of Black Christian leaders past and the present, the continuing struggle against racism and structural injustice in church and society, the legacy of colonialism and the opportunities for partnership in mission. Over the past thirty years, I have also engaged in numerous conversations with Caribbean and African church leaders about the challenges involved in developing multi-ethnic and truly multicultural communities. I have become increasingly convinced that progress will require established leaders to place greater trust in their bicultural younger leaders to pioneer multi-ethnic church planting initiatives.

The pursuit of peace and reconciliation is essential in a warring and divided world. Facing the multiple and mutually reinforcing challenges of the climate crisis, military conflict in several nations (not just Ukraine), the ongoing pandemic and its aftermath, the burgeoning global movement of refugees, the domestic cost of living crisis and shortages of essentials in many places, increasing violence is

highly likely. The unjust political, economic and social structures that have caused or exacerbated these challenges will not easily be dismantled or transformed, however much such radical change is needed. Unrest is likely to grow and one of the major challenges – and opportunities – facing the Christian community is to model and practise peaceful ways to seek justice and advocate for desperately needed structural transformations. The addition of this component to the Marks of Mission is timely and a challenge to all Christian traditions and churches.

End Notes

[1] For more information, see <https://amnetwork.uk/> and Stuart Murray: *The Naked Anabaptist* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2011).

[2] A phrase familiarised by the writings of Walter Wink, especially *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

[3] See further <https://restorativejustice.org.uk/what-restorative-justice>. Howard Zehr is an American Mennonite whose writings have inspired many others – for example, *Changing Lenses: Restorative Justice for Our Times* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2015). The first Chair of Restorative Justice anywhere in the world is Christopher Marshall at the Victoria University of Wellington – a member of the Anabaptist Association of Australia and New Zealand.

[4] <https://peacefulborders.org>.

[5] For example, Israel Olofinjana: *Partnership in Mission: A Black Majority Church Perspective on Mission and Church Unity* (Watford: Instant Apostle, 2015) and Harvey Kwiyani: *Multicultural Kingdom: Ethnic Diversity, Mission and the Church* (London: SCM, 2020). Both teach on the Black Light course.

[6] See <https://www.blacklightcourse.uk/>, www.urbanexpression.org.uk and <https://www.ascensiontrust.org.uk/>.