

Investing in Peace: An Inter-Faith Summit Address

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by Janet Plenert

In late June 2010, political leaders from the most powerful countries in the world will gather in Ontario for the G8 meeting. Just prior to that, interfaith religious leaders will gather in Winnipeg to speak together about holding the G8 accountable for their commitments to the Millennium Development Goals. The focus will be on poverty, environmental issues, and investing in peace.

Janet Plenert was invited to present a Christian perspective on the topic of 'Investing in Peace' at a precursor event to the World Religions Summit in May. The speakers each spoke from their faith perspectives (Baha'i, Muslim and Christian) on one of the topics. Members of Parliament were invited to the meeting so that the message from faith communities would be heard by Canadian politicians.

Greetings and thanks.

We stand at the end of the most violent and inhumane century known in the history of humankind.¹ Yet we continue to entrust about \$1.5 trillion dollars a year to nurture military solutions in addressing our commitment to peace and security. Slavery was abolished in the USA over 100 years ago, yet estimates are that the human trafficking industry includes between 12 and 27 million people in forced labour, bonded labour, commercial and sexual slavery.² The world grows enough food to feed the global population very well, yet The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that 1.02 billion people are

¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Out of Control: Global Turmoil on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Scribner, 1993) p. 17. This study estimates that 167-175 million persons were killed in the 20th century due to "politically motivated carnage." These numbers do not include killing by crime or other forms of murder.

² Evangelical fellowship of Canada, *Not so ancient: Human trafficking and Modern Slavery*, 2009

May 19, 2010

Page 2

hungry today.³ The gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow in much of the world. The challenges of our world are immense.

PEACE is not overtly stated as one of the eight Millennium Development Goals. However, the wisdom of the Psalmist in the bible tells us that justice and peace will kiss each other; they are enmeshed and inseparable. Peace IS the essential companion in the achievement of the MDGs. It is the foundation on which the goals can be established and worked at, and an overarching canopy that stretches out above them, enabling them, and guarding them. We need to name Peace as both a precursor and objective of development and invest intentionally and deliberately in it. Without that we are in danger of treating the symptoms of global dysfunction and crisis, instead of reaching for a cure.

I speak as a Christian of the Mennonite tradition. We understand peace to be core to the intention and purpose of God for the life of persons and for all of creation. This core intention is reflected throughout our scripture. In Ezekiel 34, God offers a Covenant of Peace to His people. This covenant addresses concerns for: food security, abundance in creation, freedom from fear, reconciliation between enemies, absence of war and plundering, respect for others, showers of blessings, and safety for all. And the crowning result of the Covenant is that 'they shall know that I, the LORD their God, am with them'. This is a description of the Hebrew term **shalom**: total overarching, all encompassing, far reaching, well-being for all. It is completeness and soundness. It embraces justice, mercy, rightness and righteousness, compassion, and truthfulness. It encompasses individual and community well being, economics, politics, social well being, and creation care. The New Testament repeats this all-embracing vision for peace, indicating that the plan of God is to unite all things. To create a new humanity, one in which the dividing walls of hostility between peoples and among nations will be broken down. It goes on to add that this was the vocation and the intended fruit of the life, teachings, and example of Jesus of Nazareth.

This passionate concern for integral peace for the world is shared by the world's faith traditions, and is often articulated simply by some form of a 'Golden Rule' that commands us to Love our neighbour as ourselves. This includes living with respect for others, doing no harm to others, and wishing nothing for others that

³ See <http://www.fao.org/hunger/en/> for data and explanation in <http://www.worldhunger.org/articles/Learn/world%20hunger%20facts%202002.htm> "The increase has been due to three factors: 1) neglect of agriculture relevant to very poor people by governments and international agencies; 2) the current worldwide economic crisis, and 3) the significant increase of food prices in the last several years which has been devastating to those with only a few dollars a day to spend. 1.02 billion people is 15 percent of the estimated world population of 6.8 billion. Nearly all of the undernourished are in developing countries."

May 19, 2010

Page 3

we do not wish for ourselves. It is this common voice, this core tenet of our respective faiths that unifies us in calling our governments to work more actively for a world of peace that reflects the principles of love, respect, and non-harm to others.

The Interfaith Partnership of the World Religions Summit which will meet in this room from June 21-23, has prepared a joint statement called *A Time for Inspired Leadership*. This shared document rightfully points to the need for confession before God and each other. The document states: (and I quote) *"We confess that there are those who inappropriately use religion to justify violent acts against others, and thereby offend the true spirit of their faith and the long-standing values of their faith communities."* We have, repeatedly, corporately, individually, and inappropriately used religion to justify violent acts against others. In doing so, we have set aside our faith principles and the integrity of our quest for peace, and we have failed to demonstrate that peace as a desired end must already be present in the paths we travel to reach that end. We have, for example, declared that violence, killing, and war can be justified, and we have persistently accepted the use of violence as a strategy towards peace. And we have blessed and encouraged our governments to do likewise. In so doing we have failed to be whom we are called to be by our faith traditions.

Mennonite Central Committee has produced a poster which simply states: A Modest Proposal for Peace: Let the Christians of the World Agree to Stop Killing Each Other. How wonderfully simple, yet how profoundly complex this has become. Imagine what the world might be like today, if Christians would have consistently refused to kill each other, and others. And imagine if all people of faith would do the same: the ferocious appetites for violence and war would be starved. Then the chance to bring about the fuller, more encompassing peace that is rooted in justice, and transforms all of society, would gain respectability.

As a people of faith, we raise our voices together, urging our government to uphold its promises to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and to the time-table set to do so. We remind ourselves and our government that PEACE is an undergirding condition for the successful achievement of the 8 MDGs. Far more than only the absence of war, peace is the all encompassing pursuit of well being for all people: it is the restoration of relationship between peoples, between people and creation, and of course, between people and our creator God. But we must also our help government understand that they do not have a monopoly of the pursuit of peace: it is within the vocation of all of us.

The Peace we seek and attempt to describe, ultimately, cannot be legislated. It must come via the voluntary decisions and consequent commitments of persons whose lives are transformed to be people of peace, whose hearts and souls are

May 19, 2010

Page 4

shaped by peace: in every detail of life. Essentially, we must call for a spirituality of Peace; a culture of Peace; an imagination of Peace that all have the capacity to envision and create a Peaceful world. This is our contribution, even while we call on the government to act in ways which enable greater possibility for this far-reaching peace. Governments can legislate behaviour, limit actions, enforce laws; punish the disobedient, provide services to help victims of unjust social and economic systems, provide health care, but they cannot transform the hearts of people. A transformed heart, transforms imagination, actions, and behaviour. We need to remind our people, and our governments, that peace IS the will of God, and thus the will and preoccupation of God's people, in all arenas of life and society.

Governments can help to create the conditions for people to do what people of faith do when we are at our best: care for others in non-selfish, just ways. One such active initiative in Canada today is a private member's Bill C-447 – An Act to Establish a Department of Peace; which is before the House of Commons as we speak. According to Bill C-447, a federal Department of Peace would be “dedicated to peace-building and the study of conditions that are conducive to both domestic and international peace...” It was introduced by Mr. Bill Siksay, and received a first reading on September 30, 2009. This Bill asks essentially what we as a people of faith are asking for today from the G8 leaders – that our governments invest more in a broad ranging, comprehensive, pervasive understanding of ,and commitment to, the pursuance of non-violent peace. It calls for the establishment of a Department that shall:

- (a) hold peace as an organizing principle in society
- (b) endeavour to promote justice and democratic principles in order to expand human rights;
- (c) strengthen non-military means of peacemaking;
- (d) work to create peace, prevent violence, divert from armed conflict;
- (e) take a proactive, strategic approach to the development of policies and programs that promote national and international conflict prevention, non-violent intervention, mediation, peaceful conflict resolution and structured mediation of conflict;
- (f) encourage the development of initiatives from religious groups;

As we consider how to boldly work toward attaining the MDGs, let us raise up a flood of support in Ottawa to give this Bill a second and third reading. And let us take responsibility to nurture a culture and spirituality of peace in our own faith communities, so that we can be the people we have been called to be. Let us insist that government take seriously the fact that they represent people who want PEACE in the world. Let us make Canada a new kind of global peace leader.

May 19, 2010

Page 5

Our Christian scripture asks the question: What does the Lord require of you? And it answers: to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God. May it be so.

POSTLUDE – story of taking pastors from Burkina Faso, South Africa, Ireland, England and Canada to the Peace Tower in Ottawa. Two women pastors, wearing t-shirts saying ‘Seek Peace and Pursue it’ were held back in security because they were wearing ‘politically motivated slogans’. How ironic. When we reduce PEACE to seeing it as an agenda, or a slogan, it ceases to be an undergirding value of our country that we as a people of faith understand it to be.