

Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace (DOV) Toronto Conference learnings 2001-2002

COLLECTED LEARNINGS ON RECONCILIATION

At its annual meeting in May 2000 the Toronto Conference undertook to engage the Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace 2001-2010 (DOV). At its annual meeting May 2001 it launched the Decade with the stated goal that *Toronto Conference will deepen its understanding of reconciliation.*

To assist Conference committees, Presbyteries, congregations and mission units to engage the Decade (DOV), a workshop and handout resource was distributed in the August 2001 Conference mailing. That resource provided a framework for some of the feedback listed below. Reconciliation ministries and discussion about reconciliation are taking place across the Conference. These collected learnings reflect written submissions shared with the Conference office.

Conference learnings

Conference executive

The executive undertook a discussion of DOV at its October 2001 meeting. Table groups reported back the following comments, responses and activities after September 11: letters of support and concern to mosques, we are marching to a different drumbeat than secular society, invited local mosque to worship, phone calls to mosques, invite Muslims to our churches, people are frightened, prayer is very helpful, the General Council prayer was very timely, ask the question why, reach out and make connections, further statements from president or moderator would be helpful in light of recent bombings (in Afghanistan).

The Conference president issued a statement on September 21 on behalf of the Toronto Conference following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States and the ensuing racialised violence in our communities. Then on November 22, 2001 the president issued a statement on behalf of the Toronto Conference following the United States and United Kingdom led bombings in Afghanistan.

Archives and History

At its November meeting the committee undertook a conversation on the DOV. They asked, in the aftermath of September 11, do we discuss this from an international or an individual point of view. Settlements regarding residential schools legal suits were noted.

Church in Society

In May and June 2001 respectively, the Church in Society and Ethnic Ministries committees co-sponsored a motion to establish a Toronto Conference Anti-Racism Task Group in the context of The United Church of Canada anti-racism policy and the Toronto Conference participation in the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Decade to Overcome Violence: Church Seeking Reconciliation and Peace (2001-2010), that will name the violence of racism (structural/systemic, institutional, cultural and individual/inter-personal) and begin to engage Toronto Conference in a process of education and action eventually working toward healing and reconciliation.

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In November 2001 the Church in Society committee reviewed the DOV materials and discussed the challenges to the relational aspects of reconciliation. “Remembering rightly” is an important part of truth telling what injustices have occurred.

Ethnic Ministries

At its March 2002 meeting the Ethnic Ministries committee explored the meaning of the Decade in its context. Issues such as interracial conflict, intergenerational conflict, gender injustices, and United Church involvement in the Residential Schools system were named as areas needing reconciliation in the United Church. Improved communication, common ground based on our faith and theology was named as a goal. One group noted that reconciliation should be a political terminology to make the power repent and come to the powerless.

InterChurch InterFaith

At its meeting in October 2001 the committee undertook a discussion of DOV.

What do we know about reconciliation that would strengthen our ministry?

- Reconciliation works where both parties agree on the goal.
- Parents have conflicts but both are committed. Love is the will to love. The peacemaker role (triangulation) does not work. The two primary parties may agree on the goal but disagree on the means.
- The word “reconciliation” implies being a surveyor to or outside the conflict. Our experience as actors (individually and as a nation) is to figure out the pain we have inadvertently carried for others (residential schools, Arab world).
- Reconciliation has to do with making all parties comfortable.
- A question we may want to ask ourselves as United Church: How much do we truly face conflicts and difficult misunderstandings and uncomfortable differences that appear irreconcilable or are we spending most of our time tiptoeing around as a “peacekeeper” (Don’t rock the boat!) trying to “get along” with everyone?
- We need to openly confess more fears, frustrations, and failings – before we try to present ourselves as competent agents of reconciliation.
- Maybe we need some open and honest confrontation (not avoidance of conflict) we have people with resources, ask for help.

The committee identified the need to be more aware of our need to listen to our inter-faith neighbours. The committee had an engaging discussion with a Quaker discussion peace and pacifism.

Ministry Personnel and Education

At its February 2002 meeting the committee integrated worship and work with a focus on the questions about reconciliation in the DOV materials. Discussion on power issues in the current understanding of ministry leading to forms of violence. Staff associates raised concern that current understanding of hierarchical gap between ordained ministers and staff associates leads to various forms of violence, i.e. non-recognition, lack of sense of equality, power differentials, other forms of abuse, etc. Discussion ensued as to whether

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violence is the appropriate term to use in this particular discussion. The discussion was referred back to the Lay Ministries committee.

A story was shared from the book: 'A Man to Match His Mountains: Badshah Khan, Nonviolent Soldier of Islam'. His is a story we need to know more about - a Pathan from what is now Pakistan - a member of the 'ferocious' (his description) Pathans of the Khyber Pass - a 'born fighter' (again, his description) - who became a colleague and friend of Gandhi and a remarkable, consistent exponent and teacher of non-violence. His - seemingly improbable - story, as we examined it, erases myths we all have about non-violence, about Islam, and about how we can contend with oppression. It points out non-violence is for the strong, the courageous.

Based in part on the discussion and on people's reflection as individuals and in small groups, here are some of the comments on reconciliation, from the group:

- requires ongoing acknowledgement of the offence - in order to be real
- requires deep, inner struggle - (the real meaning of 'jihad')
- redress of wrongs
- forgiveness of self
- that justice be addressed
- telling of story, and repentance
- security - ability to risk
- we acknowledge the history of oppression
- is 'living God's righteousness'
- is 'unbounded joy'
- is 'deeper value'
- is like 'Han' - a long process of repentance and coming to terms with our oppression (suffered and inflicted)
- is fruit of dialogue, cornerstone of hope
- is a vision of what God intends for us.
- is love radicalised
- is hard work; does not forget pain or say it is not important
- refuses to let past control present and future
- cannot happen until the one offended is sure the offender knows how they felt. (Strong discussion on this point - and many connections)
- requires redress - gesture, acknowledgement - of wrongs - who is the judge?
- Our Creator is asking this of us
- is the Creator's gesture to humanity
- Is reconciliation a 'further stage' in overcoming violence; aren't there other 'stages' to address first?
- is a 'step beyond non-violence' - and we haven't got there yet. (Someone said 'jumping to reconciliation too quickly feels 'so Sept. 10')
- How do we address the interfaith dimensions, so important to us today?
- 're-conciliation' a problem term - it implies returning to a good
- relationship which in fact may never have existed. Tillich is helpful:

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- reconciliation - a return to unity with God and all creation, which we knew in the beginning....
- good books (besides above) : Ministry of Reconciliation - Schreiter; Christ the Reconciler - Schmeichen

The Lay Ministry committee at several meetings undertook a discussion of the Decade. The committee discussed in depth the power struggles between lay and ordered personnel.

The Pension and Group Insurance committee at its April 2002 meeting discussed the Decade and elder abuse.

The Coordinating Committee on Sexual Abuse Policy did three Presbytery workshops on the policy and two training workshops for those who serve as consultants when a sexual abuse complaint is made. The Conference Response Team works in concert with the Coordinating Committee on specific cases and has been able to provide information and pastoral care as an effort toward a form of reconciliation. While the policy does take a step toward justice making, personal reconciliation between the victim and perpetrator is not yet a part of policy or process.

World Affairs

At its 8 meetings in the past year, the World Affairs committee focused on DOV for adult education programme and several orders of the day on globalised economic injustices, world missioning, theological reflection on events of September 11, complicity in violence, practice of non-violence, non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal relationship building

World Affairs helped to launch the Decade at the Toronto Conference annual meeting May 2001 and prepared a presentation for further engagement of the Decade at the June 2002 annual meeting.

World Affairs endorsed a statement published in the Globe and Mail and La Presse on November 17 calling on our government to make all efforts for peace.

A Partner in Residence task group met over the past year and reported to the World Affairs committee on the plans for a guest from a partner church/organization to come to Toronto Conference 2003-2004 to help us deepen our understanding of reconciliation.

The Peace and Justice Working Group undertook a discussion of DOV at its March 2002 meeting. They explored what a reconciled community might look like. Their exploration of *The Ministry of Reconciliation* by Schreiter assisted in their learning. The annual education event October 2001 brought a United Church scholar, Rev. Dr. Russell Daye, to speak on the nature of Ubuntu theology in the context of reconciliation and the Rt. Rev. Marion Parry, offered a very engaging biblical reflection.

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In keeping with the petition to 37th General Council, Church in Society, InterChurch InterFaith and World Affairs committees recommended to General Council that DOV be the United Church mission theme 2003-2005.

Presbytery learnings

Dufferin-Peel

We know the importance of respect, tolerance and understanding. We do not need total agreement or consensus to talk or to communicate.

“In Christ we are reconciled and given the ministry of reconciliation.”

Talking (a) in our congregations in theology, (b) between ordained and lay people, (c) conflict resolution study/discussion.

Reconciliation is needed between faiths and between individuals of different faiths – at this time.

By experiencing reconciliation with other faiths we are more likely to reach realization of a deeper reconciliation within our own faith

Between council levels congregations that have begun to build walls between some of our parishioners. READ the book, LIVE the book, Bible study and sharing ministries, intentionally humble ourselves, bringing together other denominations, reconciliations with the Native American populations, the stating of “truth” when communicating together, asking for and accepting forgiveness, the role of apathy, the courage to speak out and lead with actions, interfaith dialogue and understanding, helping people reconcile to their own spirituality distanced because of neglect or a distorted vision of the faith (hell and damnation), catalyst, patience, calming presence, respect the person/or people even if behaviour/attitude is unacceptable, go beyond words – access non-verbal, initiative, holistic resources, tap into unconscious, beyond observable words and behaviour, if you’re going to wash dishes your hands have to touch the dirt on them, but you’re still safe, similarly, be willing to safely approach the problems. In first aid people are taught to stay safe and not become the next casualty, restorative justice is needed in order to reach reconciliation. This is evident in our churches and recently in South Africa -in community divisions – family upsets – church conflicts/divisions in the congregation, group discussions, informal presentations sharing of stories, non-threatening environment, confidential atmosphere, accepting diversity, ability to channel talents for most benefit, learn to hear with your eyes and ears, don’t prejudge, teachings in church on peace and love, awareness, openness to help people feel confident to seek help, resources important – aware of “how to” give message, education – how are students equipped to help in conflict, conflict resolution, acceptance of other opinions, need to learn to disagree with violence, need to speak out against violence!!, get togethers – talking about it, networking with women’s groups,

Toronto South

During a Presbytery meeting in November 2001 the joint World Concerns / Social Issues Committee introduced DOV. The following feedback was compiled from notes gathered from small group discussion.

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Recognizing the Need for Reconciliation

A. Reactions & Reflection — September 11th Attacks

- Job loss & bankruptcy touching congregation members.
- Globe & Mail business reporter calling people in New York every day, knowing that some might be dead.
- The many connections between people in Toronto and New York led to realization of how small a world it is.
- No real understanding of what is happening, sense of dread about retribution.
- Our sense of safety has been broken.
- At an open forum on Sunday, Sept 16 a flight attendant spoke of being afraid of flying for the first time.
- Violence begets violence, even spanking. Human beings have learned to use violence as an ultimate answer to a dispute.
- Sometimes our fear gets in the way of reconciliation — need for time.
- Was our feeling towards Muslims on Sept 11 the same as it is today? If not, what has caused our feelings to change? Ourselves? The media?
- There is a tendency to scapegoat. It is easy to blame someone else or another group.
- Religion and culture are linked.
- Fear of flying is isolating people.
- People are acknowledging religion more.
- The radical nature of evil is clearer now, as is realization there is no protection from evil.
- What about the process of demonization?
- Truth is the antiseptic for terrorism.
- It is difficult to have dialogue with people who have made up their minds already and who have limited reading opportunities to hear other points of view.
- South Africa is a good example of how to deal with violence — The Truth & Reconciliation Commission.
- As pastors, when we speak of peace we often get attacked.
- Fundamentalists and non-fundamentalists are the ones who are estranged.
- Blindness of Bin Laden to the suffering caused by Sept 11th to innocent Muslims around the world as the backlash spreads.
- It is a struggle to reach the truth because truth differs from one to another.
- All actions are based on beliefs of some kind.

B. Reactions & Reflections — Bombing of Afghanistan

- The shock of Sept 11th has forced us to delve deeper. The suffering of the Afghan people has gone on for a long time!
- How can we come up with a strategy of response that will not destroy innocents?
- How can we reconcile war with humanitarianism?
- How can we bomb Afghans and drop a little food and call this a humanitarian war?
- “Freedom” is a code word for war, not for the rights of people.

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- The media is screening out the horrors of civilian casualties in Afghanistan.

Working Toward Reconciliation

A. Individually

- Explore answers other than violence.
- Become more reflective before we speak.
- Reconciliation starts with our own estranged parts, our shadow side. We need to look at ourselves. Self understanding leads to understanding of why others lash out.
- Become more cautious about the way we speak.
- Utter kind words often.
- Get to know other groups' thought, culture.
- Guard against endorsing truisms unthinkingly.

B. Together

- Letter of support for Ellie Kesher's article in the Toronto Star.
- Eglinton St. George's listed things to do after Sept 11th which included contact with a congregation in New York, writing letters, contact with a local mosque.
- Following Faith Dialogue last Spring, contact was reinitiated with the Muslim community.
- People are open and eager to discuss Jean Vanier's book, Becoming Human.
- Dialogue about how to stop evil.
- Working with Creed each Sunday — Sept 11th: We are not alone, we live in God's world.
- Friday, Sept 14th people were invited to come into church to pray and speak.
- "To Love & Serve Others" A Dutch child during the war, another whose Father ran a resistance cell in Holland.
- Hear stories of our past we haven't heard — stories about war and hardship in our congregation — all stories told, all voices heard.
- Try to teach our children answers other than violence.
- Sometimes Christians feel that Muslims feel we are not religious enough. There is a need for discussion between the two faith groups. As well as time and openness.
- Our churches are working towards a better understanding.
- We are paying more attention to other faith communities, seeking to be in solidarity.
- We are the ones who have to change. People who have been struggling still struggle.
- We are not innocent — look at First Nations.
- The Truth & Reconciliation Commission in South Africa gives the example of beginning the process of reconciliation by truth-telling rather than engaging in self deception and refusing to recognize our complicity in the use of terrorism because of our self-interest.
- Need to work for reconciliation within our congregations where there are divided approaches to war and violence.

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- “Forgive us as we forgive those”
- Bellefair hosted a dialogue with some Muslims on Nov 8th.

Toronto Scarborough

At a January 2002 meeting the Presbytery discussed reconciliation and recorded the following comments:

- some could see few signs of reconciliation
- some saw many hopeful signs
- multicultural ministries as a positive we need more of
- interdenominational reconciliation as necessary mission (Week of Prayer for Christian Unity)
- theological conversations across divergent perspectives are difficult, but crucial
- look at our history – 3 founding churches together, another in '68
- attempts at Aboriginal reconciliation – new resource called Justice and Reconciliation
- hard work of reconciliation can lead to deeper faith
- violence is rampant, continuous in many forms – post Sept. 11th response
- particular families have been known to reconcile – Japanese Canadians
- we need to talk about that which divides us, but bridge building is a two way street
- need to conduct 3-way conversation among Christian, Jewish, Islamic partners
- we can't avoid those with whom we share hostility
- brokenness and power imbalance requires reconciliation
- we need to “walk a mile in another's mocassins.”
- “love others as you love yourself.”

Simcoe

At its September 2001 meeting the focus was on the Decade and then again in April 2002. Two global personnel addressed the Presbytery.

Lefroy United Church used the "Litany of Reconciliation" several times in the past year in worship.

Congregational learnings

Church of the Master

At a council meeting in November 2001, the church discussed reconciliation and recorded the following:

Some personal stories:

- 1) The wife of a member and her brother were estranged and in conflict, and reconciliation was made over some time, with small steps and acts of mutual effort, ie. it wasn't any particular single act that achieved reconciliation
- 2) A member told of her experience in Sri Lanka, during times of inter-religious conflict. In her community, it was a minority on both sides who were instigating violence, but

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other were silent. Only when a well respected leader was murdered did people on one side approach people on the other and offer condolences, which led to cooperation against the violence in their community. In this case that single act of violence became a catalyst for healing, because the constant but mostly unspoken tension was no longer ignored, and reconciling actions were undertaken.

Reflections about our ministry:

What reconciliation ministries are currently exercised in our Church?

- reflecting in this way at a Council meeting is one exercise of this ministry
- the worship service and workshop on Nov. 25th on Residential Schools legacy, in partnership with another church, is a form of reconciliation ministry
- Presbytery's intervention with congregations in crisis is a reconciliation ministry

Where is a reconciling presence needed in our Church's ministry?

- we need to practice and teach active listening, in our pastoral ministry and in our fellowship
- we need to be proactive regarding the shifting challenge of diversity in our community and Church
- we need to encourage open, small group ministries for the sharing of stories and reflecting on our future, our ministries, etc.
- we need a prayer group to exercise spiritual reconciliation

Lawrence Park Community Church

The adult bible study group of Lawrence Park Community Church shared the following affirmations from their discussion of the Decade:

- reconciliation is like a bridge - a helpful image
- requiring choice of individuals to cross/ intermingle - or not to do so
- use it as a central image - it picks up the rest - use your imagination re possibilities
- is a process - toward harmony
- yes, but need to know what is vision
- of active choice to find and accept a common ground that is shared and respected by all process participants or those affected
- is a risk - definitely!
- is a healing experience / hurting
- changes relationships - result
- restores connections to the community - result

They offered the following additions or new learnings:

is an activity between peers, relinquishes control - in favour of compassion, accepts differences while seeking the basis for commonality, ask for forgiveness - reciprocal - forgiveness just a part; reconciliation larger, takes time, patience, takes a long time, requires acknowledgment of wrong done, requires some restoration if loss or pain, apology / acknowledgment, those hurt need to know that those involved in the hurting understand the pain, reconciliation and restoration - what does that require?, restores relationship, includes naming the issues that caused the separation, includes the act of

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forgiveness; implies forgiveness, requires repentance, a change of heart, requires a vision of a possible future, is ongoing - always a new horizon, is where we feel a sense of God's presence, implies a strong reason to seek reconciliation, is a process of making peace with the past and moving forward to participation of a shared vision of a positive future, provides a language of inclusion respectful of cultural and ideological diversity, a process by which I acquire peace of mind in relation to an inner conflict or a difference of opinion between me and another person or persons, understanding where others are in this and allowing this understanding to develop beyond reconciliation to acceptance, apply to post Sept 11 / personal relationships / church life / residential schools, how does reconciliation differ / how is it similar? What can we apply from one to another?, describe 'conciliation' first, then re-conciliation.