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Contribution of Churches to Just Peace in Afrika Churches and the Young Generation - Peace Education as a Contribution to Just Peace in the Middle Belt Region, Nigeria

Preliminary note

In many African States, churches have a great potential to practice and to foster peace education. A survey was conducted in Nigeria to look at peace education carried out by churches connected with GKKE members. In order to deal with the complexity of the conflict situation in Nigeria, the GKKE expert group decided to limit itself to the "Middle Belt" region, i.e. mainly Plateau State and adjoining states, and to the topic of youth and education.

Due to the Corona pandemic it was not possible to travel to the region. Instead, a survey was commissioned in which representatives of various Christian churches and schools in Nigeria were interviewed by telephone. Based on these interviews, but also on experiences in neighbouring African countries, four theses on peace and education work in the Middle Belt region were formulated which yet need further review and discussion.

Introduction¹

The Middle Belt region is the area in Nigeria where the predominantly Muslim north meets the Christian south. It is home to over 50 different ethnic groups. The violent conflicts that have arisen in this region, especially since 2001, are ethnically and religiously charged. The causes, however, are the dwindling land resources and opportunities to generate income. There are pastoralists and farmers competing for farmland, pastureland and corridors for migrating herds. Large landowners fence off their areas and force pastoralists to take long detours, putting even more pressure on usable land. This creates tensions between communities in villages and towns.

Another aspect are the differences in rights and claims of local people and settlers (indigenes - settlers). Settlers usually come to the region from the north, belong to other ethnic groups and mostly are Muslim. The situation is aggravated by population growth and climate change.

In conflict analysis, economic and social factors are often ignored, and religious reasons are cited instead as causes of conflict. In most cases, the conflict actors are youths and young adults, especially males. Without work or income, without career prospects, they allow themselves to be mobilized. Many of them are disillusioned with life, feel abandoned and become a problem in their communities.

¹This passage is based on the interviews of the survey.

Those who concern themselves with the conflict dynamics in the region should look at the education system and youth work. Therefore, in the following based on the interview survey, some examples from the concrete peace building and education experiences of churches in the region are presented.

Youth and peace work of the churches

Justice Peace and Development Commission (JPDC) of the Catholic Church in Jos, Plateau State

The JPDC's peace work is aimed at communities as well as schools. The goal is to curb ethnically and religiously motivated conflicts, but also to reduce bullying, corporal punishment and violence overall in school life. In "Peace Clubs", young people learn to work toward sustainable and "positive" peace². Furthermore, they are trained to start and run such clubs themselves. The clubs are established in schools where tensions and violence are high: between teachers and students - but also among students. Drug abuse may be common too. These schools are often located in environments characterized by violence.

In the workshops, a variety of methods is used, the link to the community is established, and the young people are trained to initiate their own activities and small projects. Various thematic manuals are now available, and hundreds of these clubs have already been founded. The involvement of young people, teachers and community members as "peace ambassadors" has a positive impact on schools and their environment. The clubs often succeed in bringing together different ethnic groups as well as Muslims and Christians. Meanwhile, representatives of the local government and security forces are also involved, bringing together different levels from the grassroots to the political leadership.

In conflict prevention, the peace ambassadors learn to recognize warning signals, to deal with them and to alert the appropriate authorities if necessary.

TEKAN Peace Desk, Jos, Plateau State

The "Peace Desk" of the regional umbrella organization of 15 Protestant churches with a total of 20 million believers in the Middle Belt region has been involved in peace work for many years. The work involves interreligious dialogue and trauma counselling, extracurricular activities for school students and children, and general monitoring of the conflict situation in the region.

To deal with trauma, usually two three-day workshops are offered, in which those affected can come together and tell their stories in a protected space. Sports and games play a major role in the work with children and young people. Singing and dancing are the final activities for everyone, adults and young people, according to the local culture. For this work, volunteers are trained in a longer training process including mentoring during the practical phase.

According to TEKAN's assessment, trauma recovery is an important element of peace work to break the cycle of violence, hatred and revenge.

²Positive peace includes, besides other elements, the sustainable reduction of structural causes leading to conflict and violence.

Increasingly, young people are asking churches to advocate not only for peace but also for justice. In the face of food insecurity, land conflicts, water scarcity and climate change, peace cannot be talked about without addressing justice issues.

Interfaith Mediation Centre, Kaduna

The centre was founded in the late 1990s and became known through the film "The Imam and the Pastor, Attempts at Peace in Nigeria". It has branches in various states, including Plateau State. Its work focuses on mediation between conflicting parties, be they farmers and herders, ethnic groups or the different religions, Muslim, Christian or traditional. When possible, the centre promotes peace agreements. Clergymen and -women of the various religions are trained in mediation. Efforts are made to use de-escalating language and to establish contact with the grassroots in the respective communities.

Experience shows that in order to foster peace and non-violent conflict resolution, intra-religious work must be done first. Only, when young people in particular understand the difference between 'being religious' and 'living by faith', do they change their way of thinking and begin to act towards peacefully living together.

Inter-religious work is building on intra-religious work - in such a way that concrete problems and questions from everyday life are dealt with in "reflective and structured dialogues". The centre cooperates with schools and trains young people in peer mediation. These young people, often future leaders, are empowered and encouraged to engage and mediate conflicts at school and in the community.

Protestant School

The school of the Church of Christ in Nations in the Eastern part of Plateau State has an explicitly Christian self-image. Academically, it has a good reputation. It is open to Muslim children, yet, there are few Muslim children enrolled.

The school is located near a Muslim settlement area and is well respected by the local population. The school has not been attacked during outbreaks of violence in recent years. The school is state-approved and follows the Nigerian school curriculum. In addition, it aims to relate the learning content to Christian teaching. Discipline is considered very important and enforced even with corporal punishment when necessary. Peace education is offered by external actors in the form of workshops, but is not an integral part of teaching and school life.

Catholic School

The Catholic secondary school in northern Plateau State is located in a region where there have been repeated attacks by cattle herders on surrounding farming villages in recent years. The school itself however, has never been attacked, but has suffered from declining student numbers for about two years due to parental concern because of the violence. The school follows the Nigerian school curriculum and strives to achieve a good academic standard. Furthermore the school aims to shape the behaviour and attitudes of the children and young people in holistic and positive ways. The government education authority monitors the quality of teaching (as in all church and private schools). Students come mainly from lower-middle-class

families, but children from poor backgrounds are also admitted. They do not have to be Catholic. However, attendance at Catholic Mass is an integral part of school life. Peace education plays a major role. It was introduced by the local Justice Peace and Development Commission, whose modules and manuals are still used regularly today. The whole school is involved on a voluntary basis, not just as a club or study group. Due to the violence in the environment, students and teachers are highly motivated and engaged. Classroom activities in general are characterized by diverse and open methods. When conflicts arise in class, students and teachers now successfully use tools they learnt from their peace clubs' work.

Four theses on peace and education work of churches in Nigeria

1. Churches and their educational institutions in the Middle Belt region do express their commitment to justice and peace and work to improve the situation.

Mostly, the engagement, as far as it could be observed through the interviews, is at the congregational level. In schools and in extra-curricular youth work, there are peace clubs where young people are trained as mediators and peace ambassadors. In many cases, these youth come from both faith communities, Christian and Muslim. They are often able to resolve conflicts among their peers without having to turn to teachers. Their successes encourage them.

In faith-based organizations, victims of violence, including youth, are taught how to deal with trauma. This provides relief and can prevent victims from becoming perpetrators in revenge. There is a great danger that children will see violence as a legitimate means at an early age³. The traumas triggered by violence not only affect the psyche, but also lead to physical problems and disrupt communities. If space can be created to talk about the experiences of violence, problems can be reduced. Church institutions cite many examples of this. However, there are too few well-trained counsellors and trainers for dealing with trauma and psychosocial problems. Without sufficiently qualified support, there is a risk of re-traumatization, despite all the successes.

In courses on trauma and peace, church institutions succeed in bringing together members of different religions and conflict parties. Church leaders can improve inter-religious relations, build trust and be role models. Churches can create the space for communication and reconciliation.

2. The understanding of the relationship and connections between justice and peace varies among Christian churches in the Middle Belt region.

Often peace is cited as the first priority, with justice following in second place. Consequently, the focus is on violence mitigating peace work. This is linked to attentive observation of when and where conflicts arise in order to inform and alert state authorities.

On the other hand, it is perceived that without addressing the issues of justice and trauma, the vicious circle of conflict and violence cannot be broken.

³Asking a boy what is in his mind, what his wishes may be, often comes the reply, when I am grown up, I will buy me a gun and shoot the guy who has killed my father.

Scarcer resources for arable farmers and pastoralists lead to competition for land and water. Climate change and unequal distribution exacerbate the situation. This is bringing justice issues ever more into focus. In addition, there are widespread poverty and corruption - issues that should also be included in peace education to further develop the programs.

3. For education to contribute to justice and peace, it must be of high quality. In peace education, too little attention is paid to the conditions of learning and learning processes.

"Peace education" is introduced in schools through e.g. peace clubs by external providers, hence it does not exist in all schools. Peace issues are usually detached from normal school activities. There are hardly any cross-connections with other learning contents. Participation-oriented or activating learning methods are used only in a few schools.

This creates contradictions or inconsistencies. Peace clubs are offered, but everyday school life is often characterized by the demand for obedience and discipline. Corporal punishment and public apologies are seen as proven means to enforce rules and morals. Strengthening self-esteem and promoting critical thinking, on the other hand, are no pedagogical goals.

In general, the need for peace education in schools is recognized by church representatives. Church institutions have developed their own materials for peace education.⁴

4. Good education has great potential to contribute to just peace. Education must be available to all.

Education should not only impart technical knowledge, but also encourage reflection on sustainability, human rights, gender justice, peace and tolerance. Violence must be perceived as a structural problem. Its causes must be recognized. Schools must be a safe place, for marginalized groups and especially for girls.

Some of the Christian schools accept Muslim students. They want to see them as brothers and sisters, but it is difficult for these students to maintain their Muslim identity. Depending on majority conditions regionally, and depending on local conditions, church schools should open their doors more to the other religious community to allow student interactions. This can set an example of living and learning together and make it clear that the causes of conflict do not lie in religious affiliation. In an environment of religious diversity, it should also be possible to accommodate not only students but also teachers who belong to a different religion.

Church schools are subject to state school supervision, but receive no material support from the government. They must manage on fee income and occasional donations. Some strive to offer low fees and scholarships, deliberately and out of Christian motivation, to enable children from poor backgrounds to attend. Thus, there is the potential for church schools to gain more recognition and support beyond their own church in society.⁵

⁴For example the manuals of TEKAN, „Healing and Rebuilding our Communities“ and the extensive material of the Justice Peace and Development Commission.

⁵„The offer of education by some schools as public good contributes to reduce the inequality gap giving a contribution to social justice.“, Scheunpflug, Wenz, 2015

For the Middle Belt region, as well as Nigeria as a whole, there is no alternative but to co-exist and shape people's living together peacefully and just. Religion plays an essential role in all aspects of public life and in families and communities. Even though religion is a dimension in many conflicts, at the same time religion has the potential to serve peace - and especially through educational institutions, to promote social cohesion and sustainable development. For this, quality education is indispensable.

"Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world." Nelson Mandela

Berlin, January 2021

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