Peace church in a world of conflict

As we come to the question of how we lead faithful lives in a context of violence and conflict, we need to separate violence and conflict. Violence, defined by Alastair McIntosh, is a “violation of the soul including its extension into the body.” Violence perpetuates itself through the ‘myth of redemptive violence’ – the belief that greater violence is a legitimate and effective way of resolving lesser violence. Violence frequently starts with very small acts between individuals but escalates and spirals destroying families, brutalising communities, and McIntosh argues - atrophying our souls.

Conflict is related but different. We live in a world which feels increasingly polarised. We are divided by confrontational and adversarial ways of thinking and acting, into winners and losers. However, unlike violence which we are called to resist, conflict in the world, and in the church, is normal, should be expected and not feared. During his ministry, Jesus drew together a weird and wonderful group of people - people who didn’t naturally belong or get on together - we would be fooling ourselves to think that they all skipped off sharing flatbread and grape juice. Churches where conflict is not acknowledged, or where people are afraid of conflict or think that disagreeing is wrong can become places of ill-health. However, if we can acknowledge that conflict is part of every human community and that there can be healthy, constructive ways of dealing with conflict, then the church can foster a culture of peace and peace-making.

This morning I would like to look at this issue of being true to our calling to peace by starting first with the life and ministry of Jesus. Then we will look at some skills and practices of peace-making which I have learnt as a pastor in peace churches and networks.

A. Jesus is central to our peace-making

I am an Anabaptist. It has taken me some time to discover this identity, but over the past 10 years or so, it has come increasingly significant. I have brought some leaflets with me that tell you a bit more about the Anabaptist Network in the UK and what our core convictions are. There are 7 core convictions, many of which relate to our subject today, but my starting point is the first one:

Jesus is our example, teacher, friend, redeemer and Lord. He is the source of our life, the central reference point for our faith and lifestyle, our understanding of church and engagement with society. We are committed to following Jesus as well as worshipping him.

1. Jesus is the peacemaker: as Paul writes in the letter to the Ephesians “He himself is our peace.” (Ephesians 2:14) If we want to know what peace means, we have to
look to Christ and the life that he lived. He spent time with sinners and outsiders, with people who would have been considered enemies to his friends, family and community – like soldiers, tax collectors and women.

2. Jesus absolutely rejected violence. This was not passive nonviolence though, it was active and engaged, and included for example, the turning over of the money-changers tables that violated the temple and freeing the animals that were due for sacrifice. At the time of his arrest (after Peter had loped off the ear of Malchus, the high priest's official) Jesus said to Peter: “Put your sword away. For all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword…. No more of this!” Jesus then also healed the severed ear.

3. Jesus’ actions are part of the new reality which he initiated. From his words in Luke 4, we see that Jesus ushered in the Kingdom of God based on freedom for captives, sight for the blind and jubilee for all of creation. He declares, “until now the kingdom of Heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.” (Matt 11:12) But now a new fulfilment of the law is to take ascendancy. In the gospel of Matthew and Luke, Jesus teaches explicitly that his disciples are called to love their enemies and pray for them. The Anabaptists took this teaching as formative for their faith and discipleship. The Sermon on the Mount was not just for those in religious orders, priests or scholars. The Sermon on the Mount was foundational for ordinary Christians and in it Jesus called his disciples to love those who persecuted them and declared blessing on those who were agents of peace.

4. Jesus offered and taught a radical alternative to survival under the political oppression of Rome: the creation of a new kind of community where Romans and Jews were part of the same family as forgiven and restored people. In this new community unreconciled enemies are reconciled, and unforgiven people are forgiven and they are all given new purpose – to share this good news of peace with the nations.

5. The Cross is the supreme symbol of non-violence. Jesus’ death, on a Roman cross, is the means of his peace-making. In his death, Jesus forgave the sins of his enemies and made peace. Jesus died because he embodied a life of liberation. Furthermore, in the resurrection, God declared Jesus to be “Lord of all” – the reconciling work of God is manifest in resurrection and God vindicates the foolishness of his peace-making Son.

“For Anabaptist spirituality, the commitment to nonviolence is not biblical fundamentalist pacifism or a conscientious objection to participating in violence. It is a radical attachment to the person of Jesus. Jesus chose the way of the cross as the clearest expression of how God confronts and deals with human evil, not by responding in kind, giving evil for evil, but by extending self-giving, non-resistant love.” (Kreider)
6. Because of the work of God in Jesus, and the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the followers of Jesus, peace is made possible. The Spirit falls on Romans, oppressors, enemies, the weak and those asked to do humanly impossible things! It is only because of the resurrection and the Holy Spirit that God’s people can be peacemakers.

As Jesus is our example and the one whom we seek to imitate, it follows that the church, as the people who have been reconciled to God and to each other, acts a sign of God’s intention for creation. God’s plan is to ‘reconcile to himself all things’ (Col 1:20) The church is from diverse backgrounds, but now we have been made into a new people. In our life together, in our words and actions we witness to the fact that God is a God of peace.

B. What might this radical attachment to Jesus the peacemaker look like in our Christian communities?

Perhaps let us start with a story. This is the story about Dirk Willems, a Dutch Anabaptist from the town of Asperen in the mid 16th century. Although baptised as a baby, he had refused to attend his parish church, which everyone was expected to. Instead he joined an underground house church, and was baptised as a follower of Christ. Dirk met with other Anabaptists in a home in Asperen to study the Bible and encourage each other to be faithful disciples. However they were betrayed to the authorities, who raided the house, arrested and imprisoned Dirk and his friends, who faced the death penalty for re-baptism and for being subversives. Dirk managed to escape from his cell and was making his get away across a frozen lake when he heard a shout from behind him. A prison guard had spotted him and was giving chase across the lake. Dirk was almost at the other side when he heard a crack and shouts for help. The ice was thin in places, and the guard had fallen through into the freezing water. Dirk immediately turned back, reached into the icy waters and saved the drowning man from sinking. He was also promptly re-arrested and sent to a more secure prison to await his punishment. Dirk was burned at the stake and the reports of his death noted that it was very long and painful.

What made Dirk turn back?
He didn’t have time to think.

He didn’t have time to have a Bible study or ask his pastor.

He responded instinctively - as someone who had been nurtured and discipled within a community that taught nonviolence, that prayed for peace, that resolved conflicts peaceably.
This story always makes me reflect on what I would have done - would I have turned around? Would I have kept running?

And does the community that I am part of nurture my reflexes towards nonviolence?

Do we have companions and fellow travellers that support us to practice peace in our lives?

The reflexes that our church nurtures will be formative not only for the way in which we deal with each other in our church community, but they will be decisive in how we interact with the world around us. Alan Kreider was a Mennonite historian, and he describes the peace church having a ‘domestic’ policy - how we act ‘at home’ in our own communities, and a ‘foreign policy’ - how we engage with the wider communities in which we live, and the world at large.

1. Let us look at how we might we develop a ‘domestic’ policy of peace in our churches.

   - The church is shaped by the stories that we tell, the songs that we sing, the ways in which we pray and the things that we pray for. In worship we tell the big story of God at work through history, from the liberation of the Israelites, to the psalms of joy and lament, to the table worship of the New Testament churches. Worship is for remembering the narrative of our faith and of God reconciling all things to Godself.

   - One of the most central practices of a peace church is the sharing of communion. Jesus was regularly at table with his disciples and followers, and for us it is also at table that we meet with Christ, who breaks the bread and pours out the wine and reveals his presence to us. At the table of Christ we are all equal. Jesus said at the last supper that his disciples should remember him, and to remember his teaching. Communion is a time when we remember the ‘how’ of Jesus’ life: enemy-love, radical-inclusion, new-creating.

   - At E1CC, one of the 4 values was a commitment to be a peace church: to make peace between ourselves and God, in our church community and in our families, between friends and in our local neighbourhood.

   - One of the ways that we worked this out was committing to speaking the truth and learning to listen well. This is something that I have taken into my family life also. We used to say in our church gatherings that we were a community that told the truth. We didn’t use the language of ‘not lying’ but rather that we regularly confirmed that we were learning to speak truthfully to each other which sometimes meant that we had to hear difficult or challenging things from our fellow brothers and sisters. We also committed to practicing listening well. As we listen, we demonstrate with our whole selves that the person in front of us is worthy of our time, our attention
and our presence. Miroslav Volf wrote: “We enlarge our thinking by letting the voices and perspectives of others, especially those with whom we may be in conflict, resonate within ourselves, by allowing them to help us see them as well as ourselves, from their perspective, and if needed readjust our perspectives as we take into account their perspective.”

- We decided that if we wanted to be a church committed to peace then we needed to look at how we dealt with conflict. E1CC is a small church community based in a hard-pressed part of the eastend of London – one of the most refreshing things for us when we moved there was that Eastenders are straight-talking. If there were disagreements in the church, we knew about it! We took 3 months to understand how we dealt with problems arising in our church, how we reacted to difficulties and how we could try to understand conflict from another perspective. At the end of the 3 months we wrote a covenant together. It contained commitments to pray regularly for each other, that we would not pass on gossip or accusations about others, and that we would engage honestly and openly with issues that were causing concern in the church. It also detailed the process of conflict resolution that we would work through when arguments arose. We all signed it and agreed that we would commit to working through our disagreements in this way.

- As well as a process for talking through conflicts, my colleague and I regularly offered mediation to families or individuals who were arguing or at odds with each other. We wanted to develop skills to resource our church and also our wider community in peacemaking.

2. How might we work out the ‘foreign policy’ of being a peace-making church?

The God whom the Bible reveals is a God who has a mission. This mission is to bring wholeness to creation and to reconcile former enemies. The mission dei of God is not for the church – it is for the world. God invites the church to be part of this work of reconciliation and shalom, but a peace church is not an end in itself, but an instrument of God's mission of reconciliation and peace. As we deepen and nurture the practices of peace in our church communities, we are going to become more confident and able to witness to peace in the world around us. How might this happen? 4 suggestions:

1. Peace churches are churches that are educated and aware of the violence in their communities and wider society, so that they are able with engage with people’s questions around peace-making and alternatives to war and retaliation. Peace churches are places where we should talk about violence and also develop alternative responses.
2. Our churches can also be places of training in peacemaking. One example of this is Christian Peacemaker Teams – which started following a call in 1984 by a Mennonite called Ron Sider for Christians to take their peacemaking as seriously as soldiers, who are prepared to kill and die for their belief in their ways of dealing with enemies. His call was for Christians to love their neighbours and enemies, and if necessary put their lives on the line nonviolently to prevent, reduce or transform conflict, being active rather than passively non-resistant. We can learn from organisations like this, we can encourage people to join peacemakers in conflict zones, and we can financially support people taking significant risks for peace. (Talk to Ruth afterwards for more info on CPT)

3. Churches committed to nonviolence must advocate for peace and justice. Peacemaking is a collaborative project and we need fellow activists to support the movement for peace, and to encourage each other. Churches and transnational citizens groups can act in concert and learn from one another. These groups can also sustain concern and interest when the media and world opinion are unaware, forget or simply move on to the next crisis.

4. In our churches, we must address some of the root causes of conflict and war. Sustainable development, one of the elements highlighted by Glen Stassen for ‘just peacemaking’ theory, requires long-term advocacy and commitment from a locally connected network of groups and churches. A vital role of peacemaking is challenging injustice and striving for fair systems and structures which allow the possibility of thriving for all people.

One small way of addressing economic inequality in our church in the eastend of London was to start a community fund. Anyone could approach the church to ask for help with purchasing furniture, painting a room or getting help with buying school uniform. In the first instance we tried to find what resources people needed from amongst ourselves, and if that was not possible then everyone was invited to donate their time or money to get what was needed.

C: Hope wins…

In closing – one of the most important things that we do as communities of peace-makers and Jesus-followers is that we cultivate communities of hope. Our hopes are not built on utopian expectations, but in day-by-day practices of love and nonviolence which can bring transformation to relationships, communities and structures. Some of the examples that I have given might seem insignificant in the broader scheme of things, but they are making incremental change in the lives of people in one small part of the eastend. We are living in a time of deep uncertainty and disorientation, but these challenges invite us to participation. Rebecca Solnit says “Hope locates itself in the premises that we don’t know
what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes — you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists take the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It's the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand. We may not, in fact, know them afterward either, but they matter all the same, and history is full of people whose influence was most powerful after they were gone."