



(International Conference Against Xenophobia hosted at the Copperbelt University in Kitwe - Zambia)

Introduction.

The problem of xenophobia (in Africa and everywhere else in the world) is an unacceptable behaviour reflecting various forms of injustice, discrimination and hatred against people of other nationalities. The result of xenophobia has been injuries, damage to property, death and displacement of people perpetrated by the locals who negatively perceive foreigners as being responsible for their social and economic predicaments such as unemployment, poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, etc. The locals tend to regard the foreigners to have taken away their privileges for social services in their country although this may often not be true in many circumstances.

The church's concern with this problem is based on the fact that xenophobia is founded on hatred, intolerance, biases, ignorance, misinformation and selfishness. Expressions such as "*Zambia is for Zambians*"

or

"South Africa is for South Africans"

have a tendency to trigger a widespread message that (when interpreted) would mean that foreigners are unwanted because

"they don't belong here"

. From the Christian perspective, this phenomenon is in bad taste because it is contrary to the practice of the Christian faith and the teachings of the Bible.

The central theme of the Christian faith is *"love for one another"* and this is often seen in the

regular teachings of the church aimed at promoting co-existence, peace building, unity in ethnic-diversity, tolerance, generosity, hospitality, forgiveness and justice. The Christian faith is built on the message of unconditional love for one another and even love for one's enemies. To love one's enemies means taking on the very practice of the unconditional love of God – which means regardless of the nationality, race, colour, background, gender or social or economic status of a person, the Christian message of love cuts through all the likely biases or prejudices. Such a message of love gives no room for anyone to hate or indiscriminate harm. Even when hurt or offended, the Christian message urges forgiveness rather than retaliation or vengeance. It is for this reason that the church has the power to provide hope for peace on our continent if only we can use the message properly and effectively to influence our society.

The church stands for justice and peace and plays (or should play) its role by teaching people against unacceptable behaviour, extremism or fundamentalism that would be injurious to others and provide mediation and reconciliation in conflict situations whenever they occur. The church should be seen (at all times) to be promoting a culture of co-existence between people in a wide diversity of groups such as ethnicity, nationalities, multi-religious, socio-economic complexities etc.

What the church is

The church is not buildings or infrastructure but the people. This is often misunderstood when people say, "we are going to church". The Bible defines the church as the light of the world and the salt of the earth. This means the church is set as a guide to show what is right, and to preserve what is right. The church should stand out to point society to what is right, correct wrongs, and promote values that enhance peaceful co-existence regardless of racial, social, tribal, ethnicity or political affiliations of an individual or group of persons. When the church fails to accomplish this role, then chaos becomes inevitable.

The Role of the Church in Promoting Peace

The church should be pro-active in preventing xenophobia and also in supporting victims of xenophobia whenever it happens. At the most the church should prevent rather than look at reacting to the problem after it has occurred. Lost lives cannot be recovered and the hurts sometimes create intergenerational prejudices and resentment against the perpetrators of violence.

The church's central message of love can be the anchor for peace building as long as this is not only directed to those in the congregations alone but to everyone in society. The church can achieve this by urging its members to act upon the message and subsequently influencing others in the general public to act accordingly and to behave in appropriate manner. When the Church *'lives the word'*, it will enable the average person in the community to emulate such conduct.

- **Unity in ethno-diversity** (*Psalms 133:1-3 Behold how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity...upon this (unity) God commands a blessing.*)

The church should promote unity across regional boundaries, tribal lines, political affiliations and socio-economic status of individuals. It is impossible for churches that do not embrace ethnic diversity in their church set ups to promote unity in the general public. It is unfortunate that some churches are so closed that they can only be identified with one tribal grouping, a geographical location or a particular linguistic. Such churches would not be effective in promoting peace across ethnic barriers because they have not learnt to co-exist with others from different backgrounds.

The church should allow and be seen to set an example for open and peaceful relationships and transfer 'this' way of life to the remainder of the society.

- **Peace building** (*Mtt.5:9 Blessed are the peace makers, for they shall be called sons of God.*)

One of the most profound teachings of Jesus Christ was the Sermon on the mount where he taught the *'beatitudes'*. He bestowed blessings on peacemakers and that such people shall be called the sons of God. The church ought to apply this message by ensuring that the communities and societies live in peace, promote conflict resolution and reconciliation across all forms of boundaries during election times, tribal disputes, racial misunderstandings etc.

- **Propagating the message of love** (*Matthew 5:43-46 "You have heard the law that says 'love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say, 'love your enemies!'...."*) (

1Peter 4:8

"Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of

sins”)

This teaching of love went contrary to the law that the Pharisees had been used to because theirs was a selective kind of love. People chose who to love and who not to love. In the communities we live in, even the most hostile and hurting people may be so loving and caring howbeit only to those they have chosen to love. During times of greatest conflict, hating people have been seen to be loving people to others. That is not Biblical love. Jesus came to correct that wrong teaching on love.

If the church promotes the love of the enemy as Jesus taught, It means that we should go out of our way to embrace and love people that we have not commonly associated with such as foreigners or strangers, other ethnic groups or social groupings that may generally be perceived in a negative way. The Biblical ‘*agape*’ love entails that we love unconditionally, loving the unlovable, loving the enemy and those that may be perceived differently or who may not be expected to reciprocate. Love covers a multitude of sins . When the church is effective in its ministry, the society should change and become a better place in which to live. The failure for peace in the society is an indictment on the church.

Like church – like society.

- **Treatment of foreigners (Deut.10:18b** "...He shows love to the foreigners living among you and gives them food and clothing. So you too, must show love to your foreigners...")

The Bible has outlined how foreigners should be treated. Immigrants provide a great potential to offer positive contribution to holistic societal transformation through their technical skills, religion, entrepreneurship and productive activities. The nationals are urged to treat foreigners accordingly and to not harm them. The Bible requests the nationals or the locals to actually provide for the foreigners clothing, food and shelter in addition to ensuring their safety and protection. There is no Biblical justification for any local person to ill-treat a foreigner or a stranger. The church should stand for "*justice for all*". The local people as well as foreigners should be subjected to the same laws of the land without discrimination and the Bible pronounces a curse on anyone who denies justice to a foreigner.

- **The Great Commission cuts across national borders**

The Great Commission (**Matthew 28:19-20** “Therefore go and make disciples of all the nations”)

that Jesus assigned to his disciples was to

'all the nations'

. The church cannot be effective in its Biblical mandate of the Great Commission if it does not break the racial prejudices based on nationality, color and ethnicity. The church's message is to everyone. Therefore, the church should protect the people it is supposed to serve. This may call for sacrifice. It is impossible for the church to effectively represent Christ if it inclines itself to any form of bias or prejudice that may hinder the promotion of peace in society. Such a church will have failed its primary purpose of existence. The church should help set an example on how to relate with people from other nations by making them feel loved and welcomed. Some people find themselves in our country due to hostile circumstances in their own countries such as civil wars, political unrest etc. The church must provide hope and healing to such people by helping them to settle and live a fulfilled lifestyle.

- **Discourage hate speech** (**James 3:2** “For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect....”)

The Bible explains the power of spoken words, that life and death are in the power of the tongue. Careless words by traditional leaders, politicians or clergy may be interpreted differently by the hearers and this may trigger a violent reaction that may lead to loss of lives, damage to property or displacement of persons or general disruption of peace. The church should provide counsel as well as set an example on appropriate speech. The church can play a significant role in ensuring that the media does not become a channel for violence or a tool for hatred. The church can facilitate dialogue and discussions that promote peace through appropriate speech and suggest peaceful ways for dealing with differences.

- **Speak against evils of society**

The church should be obliged to speak to any group of people or individuals that are likely to disrupt peace or that may have the potential to cause violence. The church should be pro-active by ensuring that everyone plays a part in promoting peace and creating a conducive environment for co-existence among people from diverse backgrounds.

The church has a moral responsibility and a Biblical mandate to speak on behalf of those that are downtrodden, marginalized, abused, discriminated against, ill-treated etc. The church should promote peace by creating an atmosphere that is conducive for everyone to live peaceably and also in case of any challenges – to speak for those affected, resettling the

displaced and ensuring justice against perpetrators of violence.

The church should have spoken loudly against the xenophobic violence and killings in South Africa, the post-election killings in Kenya in 2007, the genocide of Rwanda in 1994, or the seizure of white owned farms in Zimbabwe in 2000. In Zambia, the locals have been complaining that government contracts and business conditions favour foreigners and such utterances (if tolerated) can easily become a recipe for xenophobia. We should act early and prevent the worst from happening.

In Zambia, the church has been a moral voice in the affairs affecting the lives of the Zambian people and the church has stood for the promotion of integrity in public office, fight against corruption, promotion of good governance, peace building, constitutionalism and supporting the plight of the ordinary citizenry.

Conclusion

We see the role of the church in promoting peace as critical because it has the higher mandate and a more respected moral standing to speak to any group of people on any matter. The church should therefore continue to play its role and fulfil its God given mandate by propagating, proclaiming and practicing the love that Jesus Christ demonstrated – by associating himself with ordinary people some of whom had been segregated against, such as sinners, the Samaritans, the sex workers etc. By doing so, he made it possible for people to be transformed and experience the love of God.

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