



 **FORUM FOR SOCIAL
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HEALING MEMORIES IN THE CITY

Correlation between Reconciliation
and Transformation in the Mission
of the Local Church



Dr. Johannes Reimer

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By Dr. Johannes Reimer¹

1. Church in Europe – Lost in Ineffectiveness

The growth statistics in almost all European countries prove – the Church of Christ is on the defeat. Masses of traditional Church members leave the Church. And church planting and re-planting is rather a highly problematic venture.

Two basic approaches have been used in the past to overcome the situation. On the one hand, some churches sought to improve their societal image by adapting the social transformational agenda of society. The church was viewed as an intermediary agent in community, as Bishop Dr. Wolfgang Huber points to it, joining the many other societal powers of change.² In most cases our societies did not accept her offer. Others promoted Evangelism as the only answer to the alienation between Church and society. The results were similar. What is the answer? If social transformation as well as evangelism is not an adequate tool to grow the church— what then?

In our past seminars we discussed the necessity of an ecclesial paradigm shift from an inward to an outward focus in Church mission. Ecclesia must again become what she has meant to be – a fellowship of those called out of the world to accept responsibility for the world.³ She must become a missional agent of change. And in order to do so - the Church herself must change, radically change. The German Theologian and Pastor of a growing Evangelical Church in Frankfurt/Main Dr. Klaus Douglas says: “Whoever wants the Church to stay the way she is, does not want her to stay at all.”⁴ Change is unavoidable. But change to what?

Our seminars are a place where we seek an answer. Here we dream together and “wherever two or three of us dream together in His Name, Jesus dreams with us.”⁵ So I invite you to dream with me. Let me propose to you three basic observations to dream about:

- The Church is ineffective in society because the Church is preoccupied with her own matters.

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² Wolfgang Huber: Kirche in der Zeitenwende. Gesellschaftlicher Wandel und Erneuerung der Kirche. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1998.

³ See more in Johannes Reimer: Die Welt umarmen. Theologie des gesellschaftsrelevanten Gemeindebaus. Transformationsstudien Bd. 1. 2. Aufl. (Marburg: Francke Verlag, 2013), 42-47

⁴ Klaus Douglas: *Die neue Reformation – 96 Thesen zur Gestaltung der Kirche*. Stuttgart 2001,

⁵ Klaus Douglas, Kay Schennemann, Titus Vogt: Ein Traum von Kirche – wie ein Gottesdienst für Kirchendistanzierte eine Gemeinde verändert. Asslar: Projektion J, 1998, 9.

- The Church is ineffective in society because she has lost her theological calling.
- The Church is ineffective in society because she is involved in foreign business.

Positively speaking this means:

- a. The Church is for God and the World.** There can be little doubt the Church in the New Testament is God's creation sent into the world to accept responsibility for the world (see Mat. 16:18; Mat. 28:18-19). She is God's priestly kingdom in the middle of the world for the world (1Pet. 2:9-10). Where ever she starts to define her identity outside of this frame, she loses her face.
- b. The Church is God's Agent of Reconciliation.** Called by God she is sent to proclaim to the world the word of reconciliation (2Cor. 5:18-20). God reconciled Himself with the world in Jesus Christ. This opens new opportunities for the world and her societies to develop. And this is what the Church is sent to make known. Her mission is reconciliatory in nature. Where ever the Church changes the reconciliatory scope of her mission, she steps outside of her calling and loses the support of the Lord, left with her own human abilities and ineffectiveness.
- c. The Church has Her Mission.** The effectiveness of the Church is directly linked to what she does. If her task is determined by her nature and the Lord's calling - she will do best. Do other powers and issues dominate what she does and she becomes a problem in her own right? Jesus brings it to the point when he compares the Church with the Salt of the Earth (Mat. 5:13). Losing its power (saltiness) salt becomes completely useless, he says.

Recovering the effectiveness of our mission in the world presupposes the recovery of the central theological theme in all we do and run as Churches in Europe. And this theme is reconciliation!

2. Reconciliation – God's Calling for the Church

The American missiologist Craig Ott (2010:155) defines mission as " ... the sending activity of God with the purpose of reconciling to himself and bringing into his kingdom fallen men and women from every people and nation to his glory." He bases, together with other authors, his conviction in Pauline theology (see in this regard: Breytenbach 1989). Here they find the biblical foundation for a theology of reconciliation. Apostle Paul states in 2Cor. 5:18-21:

«All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.»

God gave his Church a word of reconciliation. This is what she has to say to the broken world around her. No more – no less. But what is reconciliation? The biblical term reconciliation (*katalasso* in Greek) is used six times in the Pauline letters, relating God and the world (five times) and humans to one another (once).⁶ Translated into English the term means “to exchange” and the substantive *katallage* stands for “the other”. The meaning of the term carries the notion of exchanging places with the other, having solidarity instead of being against the other. “It involves a process of overcoming alienation through identification and solidarity with the other, thus making peace and restoring relationships.”⁷

The text in 2Cor. 5:18 underlines three basic propositions: (a) reconciliation is God’s work in Christ, (b) reconciliation aims towards restoration of God’s relationship with the world; (c) reconciliation is a core ministry of the church.

It is the current condition of the world in relationship to God, which brings reconciliation to the table (Bieringer 1987:295-326). The world has become godless by having forsaken and forgetting what God’s plan for the world originally was. Dishonouring God, humans have fallen into a self-destructive life mode. And as a result, says Paul, «they were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless» (Rom. 1:29-31). This all is produced by a corrupted mind, by the futility of godless thinking. The apostle warns the church in Ephesus:

“So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.» (Eph. 4:17-18).

Ignorance is the problem. Humans have lost their vision. They have turned blind and walk in darkness. Their leaders are blind leading the blind (Matt. 15:14). And they do what is wrong in the sight of God following their own thoughts and desires and cause His wrath (Eph. 2:1-3).

The loving heart of God, however, seeks renewal and restoration. God does not want the sinners to perish (Ez. 33:11) and, therefore He sent His only begotten Son to save and reconcile the world with himself (2Cor. 5:18). To reconcile means to bring God’s plan back to memory, ignite the original vision. This is the message of God’s revelation in Scripture. “From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture witnesses to God’s total mission “to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven” (Col. 1:15-20). The fullness of reconciliation is friendship with God in Jesus Christ ...” (Rice 2005:11).

The reconciled are new in Christ (2Cor. 5:17) and follow Christ’s mind (Phil. 2:5). Reconciliation is restoration of memory, renewal of mind and the ability to understand what the will of God is for our lives (Rom. 12.1-3). Leaving our godless past behind and striving towards a future designed by God for those who accept Christ as their

⁶ Colin E. Gunton, ed., *The Theology of Reconciliation* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 15.

⁷ John W. De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 51.

Lord and Saviour - this is what reconciliation does to people. God desires peace with his creation and, therefore peace is at the heart of his mission (Reimer 2017:69). Pope Benedict XVI writes: "Reconciliation then, is not limited to God's plan to draw estranged and sinful humanity to himself in Christ through the forgiveness of sins and out of love. It is also the restoration of relationships between people through the settlement of differences and the removal of obstacles to their relationships in their experience of God's love" (Pope Benedict XVI 2011:8). And Robert Schreiter (2013:14) summarizes properly:

"What we see in these Pauline passages is how reconciliation is a central way of explaining God's work in the world. Through the Son and the Spirit, God is making peace – between God and the world, and thus also within all of creation itself. When this insight is brought together with the concept of the *missio Dei* developed a few decades earlier in missiology, we see the biblical foundations for reconciliation as a paradigm of mission, a paradigm that began taking on a particular poignancy and urgency in the last decade of the twentieth century."

To say this does not however eliminate the other elements of God's mission in the world. The opposite, reconciliation works as a frame of reference for evangelism, diakonia, dialogue and so on. In words of Schreiter:

"Reconciliation as a paradigm of mission does not replace the other paradigms, but can bring them into closer connection with one another within the larger frame of God's intentions for the world. So this twofold contribution – to the larger questions of reconciliation in the world today and to the dialogue between paradigms of mission within the churches – assures a continuing role for this paradigm of reconciliation on missionary thinking for the coming decades." (Schreiter 2013: 29).

God reconciled the world with himself in Christ, states Paul (2Cor. 5:18). The world includes the totality of life. Nothing in our existence is excluded. Consequently the Christian reconciliation requires a holistic approach.⁸ Reconciliation with neighbours is taken as a pre-requisite for reconciliation with God: "leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother and then come and offer your gift" (Mat 5:24). And where ever reconciliation with God, one self and the other around us, the society takes place – social transformation will follow. The Pope John Paul II described it thus: "there can be no peace without justice and no justice without forgiveness."⁹ Just societies are reconciled societies! In reconciliation one "has to deal with root causes of conflicts if it is to be considered genuine".¹⁰

3. Bringing the alienated to the table

God works peace through His Son Jesus Christ. But what does the praxis of reconciliation look like? How do we leave our past? How do we capture future? How do we become free for a life in God? Jesus says: "You will seek the truth and the

⁸ Colin E. Gunton, ed., *The Theology of Reconciliation* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 14.

⁹ John Paul II, Message for the celebration of the world day of peace "No Peace without Justice – No Justice without Forgiveness," no.15 (Vatican Website, December 11, 2002),

¹⁰ See Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Social Changing Order*, 25-26.

truth will set you free” (John 8:32). The answer to our questions is – we will be set free by realizing the truth for both our past as well as future. Using a biblical image we may say restoration is a process of redressing. We undress our old man made according to flesh and put on the new made in the Spirit (Col. 3:5-15). Thus restoration is a two-step process: (a) we realize what is old in us and leave it, (b) we understand what God's new creation for us is and put it on.

a. Recovering our sinful memory.

“Every conflict has its story.” (Baumberger 2012:114). Restoration of God's vision for us begins with a critical recovery of our own past. The blind will only see if their sight is restored. And to recover sight presupposes recognition of one's blindness. How will a blind person ever know what a healthy sight really means? Those born blind know nothing about seeing. They may only know by believing those who see. God is not blind. He knows us *in total*. He will reveal what is right and/or wrong in our life. Jesus promises to send His Spirit, who will reveal to the world her sin and God's judgement (John 16:8-9). The Holy Spirit leads people in all the truth (John 14:26). To see our own life story, our own biography from God's perspective, to read the pages of our past together with God's Spirit, will uncover our sinful ways and set us on His paths. Reconciliation starts with recovering our memories about our own sinful life. Apostle John states:

“If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.» (1John 1:6-7).

Realizing our own sin and confessing sin to God, opens the chance of forgiveness. And forgiveness breaks the chain of bad memory and inferiority complexes.

b. Recovering God's vision.

Restoration of God's vision, secondly, presupposes an understanding of what His new creation implies. We leave the “demonic cycle” and enter “God's cycle” in reconciliation (Baumberger 2012:116). What does it mean to be new born? How different are children of God and in what way? Apostle Paul promises that God reveals to his children who they are in Christ and what gifts and power are they given (Eph. 1:3-23). There is a whole theology behind the new identity in Christ described to us in His word. Reconciled people will find here their orientation for their everyday life. They will accentuate the mind of Christ and steadily build up a recovered memory of God's plan for their life. Thus memories are healed and the past no longer influences the present and future.

The Church is God's ambassador of reconciliation. Walter Freitag (1950:11-12) rightly pointed to the fact that a Church, accepting God's mission as her source of being, will be less preoccupied with herself and internal matters, but rather seek engagement towards the reconciliation of the world. She has been entrusted with the “word of reconciliation”. In reality she will speak prophetically into the lives of people, societies and even nations (Reimer 2017:53-62). She will uncover the personal and collective sins of humans calling them to confession. And she will present to the world an alternative way of life, inviting everybody to join a process of transformation. A process which may, according to Robert Schreier (2013:19), include four practices: healing, truth-telling, pursuit of justice and forgiveness.

The first practice is healing. “[...] reconciliation is about healing wounds, rebuilding trust, and restoring right relationships,” states Schreiter. He divides healing into three dimensions: healing of memories, healing of victims and healing of wrongdoers (:Ibid).

The second practice is truth-telling. “Truth-telling involves testimony to what really happened in the past, and a common effort to reconstruct a public truth” (:Ibid).

The third practice is the pursuit of justice. Punitive justice is the punishment of the wrongdoers. Restorative justice “may involve restitution and reparation, as well as opportunities to explore how to rebuild a just and meaningful society” (Schreiter 2013:20). And in the end, structural justice, such as changing social structures.

The fourth and final practice is forgiveness, which is a process for both individuals and societies. Schreiter also warns us against cheap forgiveness or a forgiveness that is forced upon the victims. He emphasizes that forgiveness is directed at the wrongdoers themselves and not their actions. (:Ibid).

Schreiter's missiological practice is greatly reflected in the process called Healing of Memories (HoM).

4. Healing of Memories – Methodology of Reconciliation

Healing of Memories (HoM) is a method to reconcile the broken relationship between victims and offenders. The concept was developed and employed for the first time in post-apartheid South Africa (Botman 1996) and is broadly used today worldwide in ministries of conflict resolution and reconciliation (see an overview in Garzon 2002).

The method was introduced to the European context in the second half of the 1990ties (Guitierrez 1999:152-156), tested in the context of politically instable North-Ireland (McEvoy 2008:144-155) and then employed in a number of other European countries. Reconciliation processes conducted by using HoM as tool were realized in North-Ireland, Serbia, Ukraine, Slovakia and Finland (Brandes 2008). The Conference of European Churches (CEC)¹¹ and the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)¹² decided in 2004 to establish a joint project in „Healing of Memories“. The project was placed in Rumania, a bridging country between Western and Eastern European cultures. Dieter Brandes, the former Secretary General of the Lutheran Gustav-Adolf-Werk (GAW), was appointed to the leadership of the project (see Brandes 2009).

HoM as developed in South Africa focused on reconciliation of individuals. In Europe, however, the concept expanded through the work of the „Irish School of Ecumenics“¹³ to reconciliation between groups and cultures, using the *charta*

¹¹ <https://www.ceceurope.org> (1.12.2017).

¹² <http://www.leuenberg.net/de> (1.12.2017).

¹³ See: <https://www.tcd.ie/ise/> (12.07.2017).

*ecumenica*¹⁴ as its foundation. The articles three, six and eight addressing dialogue and reconciliation between churches are of particular importance.

The 3. Conference of European Churches gathered in Sibiu, Rumania from 4.-9. September 2007 called all European Christian Churches to cooperation in matters of peace and reconciliation.¹⁵ One year later the foundation „Reconciliation in South East Europe“ (RSEE)¹⁶ and the „Ecumenical Institute of Healing of Memories“ was established in Sibiu, Rumania. The programs developed here have been used in many conflict settings including the countries in Central Africa such as Burundi, Rwanda and Congo. They follow a three-step approach (Brandes 2011:179-186; Bauer 2013:92f).¹⁷

- (a) *Joint recovery of history.* In this phase the parties work together interdisciplinary through the socio-cultural and religious backgrounds of evolution of conflicts. The aim is to understand how conflicts arise and develop and what does influence them. It is crucial that all conflict parties work in this together. (RSEE 2017).
- (b) *Joint participation in the pain and sufferings of each other.* In this phase of the process the parties hear the stories of pain and suffering of each other and develop a sense of understanding why the common history causes so much pain on the one hand, but also a sense for understanding why the offense happened. The aim is to open ways for apology and forgiveness, understanding and acceptance. (RSEE 2017).
- (c) *Joint working together on building future.* Solving the problems of the past opens ways to work on a common peaceful future. In order to work together the parties will have to discover the richness of the other, gifts and competences of each other. Active and peaceful participation in the life of each other is the aim of this step. The result is an expected reconciled community. (RSEE 2017).

It is easy to see the correlation between the Pauline concept of reconciliation as developed above and HoM. The steps are similar: recover sinful past, ask for forgiveness and start a new and changed life. Bringing God, the reconciler with all the creative power of the Holy Spirit into the process HoM will win an impressive momentum. The Spirit reveals the truth, brings people to the table of the prince of peace, grants gifts and abilities and establishes pattern of a renewed life.

Reconciliation leads to healing of memories. The conflict loaded past is not excused, but rather forgiven due to a clear confession of sin and a plea for forgiveness. At the same time an alternative future is brought to the table - God's vision. This and only this is the common base for peaceful connivance. Healing of our memories leads to a common future.

5. Reconciliation among Christians

¹⁴ Full text: http://www.oekumene-ack.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Charta_Oecumenica/Charta_Oecumenica.pdf (9.09.2017).

¹⁵ See the text of the congress appeal in: <https://www.domradio.de/sites/default/files/pdf/Sibiu.pdf> (9.9.2017).

¹⁶ <http://www.healingofmemories.ro/preocess-healing-of-memories> (9.09.2017).

¹⁷ Ibid.

In recent years a number of Christian denominations have started conversations towards reconciliation driven by the idea that only reconciled churches may work for peace and reconciliation in the world (Ahrens 2005:162-173). Such conversations begin where we realize that unity is not optional. Jesus sets the agenda: unity is a precondition for effective mission (John 17:21). Unity is not a natural human condition. In fact the opposite is the case. Unity is achieved in Christ. He is the peacemaker *per se* (Eph. 2:14) because he serves a God of Peace (Rom. 15:33) and proclaims a gospel of peace (Eph. 6:15). To serve God in Jesus in an evangelical way means to get involved in peace making.

Mennonites, for instance, involve in a number of Ecumenical conversations driven by the dream that healing memories offers great chances for a common peaceful co-existence even where theological stands may still place stumbling blocks ahead of them (see examples in Enns 2008:29-132). They met, for instance, for the first time in their own history with Roman-Catholic Leaders between 1998-2003 to discuss faith convictions of each other and sort out conflicts developed in centuries of disconnect.

In their conversation on healing of memories Mennonites and Catholics named the controversial issues of the past creating the difficult relationship between the two bodies and their own unchristian approach to solve them as sin and asked for forgiveness (Enns/Jaschke 2008:95). This required a joint reading of history in the spirit of Prayer and contemplation. Conflicting parties develop typically their own reading of historical events. They may not always be accurate. Historical treatments are always interpretations. We humans interpret from our own particular perspectives. As a result polemics dominate a relationship and hinder the parties to see their own portion of guilt in the basket. Reading history together helps to discover the alternative views relativizing predefined positions and opening a road for mutual understanding. It is crucial to name wrong doing as sin regardless what the motivation may have been. Sin can never be excused. The only way to overcome sin is forgiveness. And this was successfully achieved between the two denominations. Other conversations with Lutherans, Reformed, Baptist and Seventh-Day-Adventist followed (Enns 2012). Other Churches have undergone similar conversations.¹⁸

6. Reconciliation in multi-optional communities

We live in a multi-optional world, a world in which different and at times totally divergent life concepts stand side by side. Globalization has created a world mixed by cultures, religions and orientations. In such a world tensions and conflicts are unavoidable. And consequently reconciliation becomes the central issue in community development (Haspel 2003:472-490). Community mediation is a newly established discipline in university faculties of social work and enjoys an unprecedented growth. Faculties of practical theology and missiology respond to the new trend. Some even argue that connivance is the central challenge for the Christian Church of the future. Christian mission of the future will work for a meaningful **convivance** and the ministry of reconciliation her core competence (Reimer 2011: 19-35).

¹⁸ See reports in: <http://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/reconciliation-begins-listening> (1.12.2017).

But how does reconciliation work in multi-optional societies where the parties in conflict may not automatically accept a common base for reconciliation found in the Holy Scriptures? Theological meaning as such will be irrelevant to many people. De Gruchy (2002:26) says:

“For them, reconciliation refers to the overcoming of enmity between people whether we speak of interpersonal relations, or the broader social and political situation, without reference to God or divine activity.”

On the other hand, reconciliation as practiced by Christians cannot avoid religious concepts. Do we have to evangelize first in order to lay foundations and then as a second step offer restoration of relationships. This has for centuries been the approach in Evangelical circles. Reconciliation with God precedes reconciliation among people. And in many instances this approach proved to be very successful.

Today, however, the majority of Christian missiologists follow a different approach. Reconciliation here is understood integrally. Mission is, in fact, reconciliation as we have seen above. And mission always presupposes contextualization. Consequently De Gruchy suggests to use slightly different words and concepts by practicing reconciliation in secular or non-Christian contexts. He calls this the primary and secondary expressions of reconciliation. Whereas the primary expression only can be verified through scripture and faith-based experience, the secondary expressions “[...] are visible in social and political reality.” (2002:18).

HoM offers for this an ideal tool. To work on bringing our difficult past experience with one another to the table trying to understand the hurts and feelings of each other, forgiving each other and working on a common good future without referring to our religious convictions verbally, is an active way to live the gospel out. This is evangelism through being and doing. Words may follow in time being.

7. Healing of Memories in Community – Community Development as Church Growth

Bringing Reconciliation and Peace to communities opens new ways for developing trust between the people and the Church. Here is the agent who brings renewal to our neighbourhood people may say. Trust will open doors for other missionary activities, including evangelism and social transformation. We find examples of the missionary power of reconciliation everywhere in the world.

Reconciliation works as the recent experience of the Peace and Reconciliation Network (PRN) of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) proves. The program applied here for peace building capacities among conflicting parties of Muslims and Christians is called „Building Leaders 4 Peace“ (BLP).¹⁹ BLP invites Christians and Muslims for a weeklong peace camp in which the participants work on the troublesome relation between Christians and Muslims. The parties express their frustrations and anger with the other side, name the issues without any political correctness. And then they ask each other for forgiveness. Slowly the atmosphere in

¹⁹ <http://wea.peaceandreconciliation.net/projects/building-leaders-4-peace/> (1.08.2017).

the camp changes. The first signs of a growing trust appear and suggestions for a better future are made.

It is here where the Muslim representatives start to ask questions about the religious power behind peace. And as a rule – they will point to Isa the Messiah, to Jesus Christ who brings peace to the nations. Now the conversation is open. Questions about Jesus, the reconciler of victims and offenders are asked and wait for answers. A process started with the reality of what Jesus offers and ends potentially in a conversation about Him and His kingdom. This is mission!

In many instances local churches apply similar tools. In Columbia, for example, building local peace camps, or in world cities like Mumbai, Manila and others. We do well to consider similar approaches in our West-European settings with a growing multicultural and tensious (anxious) world.

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