

**“Behold, I Make All Things New”
Report Of The World Council Of Churches (WCC)
Ecumenical Team Visit To Zimbabwe
25 September – 1 October 2005**

“If one part of the body suffers, every part suffers with it.” 1 Cor. 12:26

Introduction

An ecumenical team sponsored by the World Council of Churches (WCC) visited Zimbabwe, 25 September – 1 October 2005. This visit was a continuation of a long journey of accompaniment by the international ecumenical community. As such it sought to build on a number of previous visits and meetings by such ecumenical bodies as the WCC, the All African Conference of Churches (AACC), and the Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa (FOCCISA) which have dealt with issues confronting Zimbabwe and other countries in the region.

The primary objectives of this visit were the following:

- to express the concern, love and solidarity of churches around the world for the people and churches in Zimbabwe in the midst of their current crisis;
- to listen to the churches and people of Zimbabwe;
- to gain a better understand of the role of the churches in responding to the crisis; and
- to seek a better understanding of the role the international ecumenical community should play in supporting the churches in Zimbabwe.

The team was composed of six persons. The members of the team were:

- Ms. Omega Bula, United Church of Canada, Team Leader
- Rev. Dwain Epps, World Council of Churches
- Mr. David Modiega, Botswana Council of Churches, representing AACC
- Ms. Henrike Berger, German Church Development Service (EED) and Chairperson of the ZCC Core Group
- Mr. Babatunde Olugoji, Christian Aid
- Rev. David K. Owen, staff of WCC/AACC, Rapporteur

The programme formally began on 26 September with an initial meeting where church leaders from the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) and the Zimbabwe Catholics Bishops Conference (ZCBC) were invited. We would like to strongly commend the cooperation and coordination that is evident among these three key ecumenical bodies in Zimbabwe. This meeting was then followed by meetings with representatives of political parties and civil society. The next day the team then separated into three groups of two persons each in order to be able to visit with church groups in various parts of the country.

One team travelled to Masvingo, Mutare, and Marondera. Another team visited Gweru and Bulawayo. The third team stayed in Harare and also visited Chinhoyi. We wish to express our heart felt gratitude to the people and communities that we met with. We have been touched by their stories and their witness and ministry. In addition, we would like to express our deep appreciation to the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) for the assistance they provided. At short notice they were able to put together a programme for us and provided transport, staff to accompany us and other valuable logistical support.

Below are issues being highlighted by the team:

Lives in Danger: Immediate and Urgent Humanitarian Crisis

Before elaborating further on other the issues that arose from these discussions we would like to highlight an urgent and overwhelming concern that continually arose. It was stressed to us that Zimbabwe is in crisis. There are critical humanitarian needs that are threatening peoples' lives, and these need to be addressed urgently. There are many dimensions to this crisis (aftermath of *Operation Murambatsvina*, collapse of the informal sector of the economy, HIV/AIDS, drought, food and fuel shortages, , unemployment, etc.), but there is no denying the fact that millions of ordinary Zimbabweans are deeply suffering now. It is a testament to the church and its ministry that most of these people are coming to the church, not to their Member of Parliament or a governmental institution. They see the church as a refuge and place of safety. But those churches which are responding to this crisis as well as their humanitarian arms (i.e. Christian Care) are under great strain. The need is much greater than can be met with current resources on the ground. What makes this situation even more pressing is the churches, their humanitarian arms, and other groups are facing serious obstacles placed before them by the government regarding the import and distribution of food. These obstacles severely limit their ability and capacity to respond.

A Divided Society, A Polarised Nation

As discussions moved beyond the immediate crisis to a deeper analysis of the situation, a number of serious concerns were highlighted. In our opening meetings Zimbabwe was described to us as a society increasing divided and polarized, and we were implored by the church leadership to tell the truth of our findings. During our visits the divisions in society were confirmed and the implications of these divisions for the lives of people and the witness of the church were underscored. The truth is often difficult to speak and hear, but we know from the gospel that it is the truth which sets us free. We received further encouragement to tell the truth from the Pastoral Letter issued by the ZCC following a gathering in Victoria Falls in July 2001. In that Pastoral Letter the church leaders stated:

“Our Lord Jesus Christ said, ‘The Truth shall set you free’ (John 8:32). Zimbabwe has reached a critical moment in its history where the truth needs to be spoken without fear or favour. We believe there is no person, institution

or country that can be built on lies. As a nation we are all called by our Lord Jesus Christ to speak the truth to one another in order to be free. As Churches we do not wish to fail the nation in this regard.”

Thus, we feel that our first responsibility is to say clearly what we have heard from the variety of sources with whom we have been in discussion. We do this out of love and as a way for the wider ecumenical movement to accompany the churches of Zimbabwe in their efforts to transform and heal their society. Church leaders told us that Zimbabwe was a deeply divided society, and we were able to confirm this.

A House Divided...Cannot stand

It is difficult for a divided Church to respond and be a force for healing and reconciliation. Disunity in society has created a divided church. It is not a surprise that what is happening in society is happening in the church. It was recognized early on in the ecumenical movement that churches are a part of society and that when that society is divided and full of conflict the church also reflects this. The church must address and heal its own divisions if it is to serve as an instrument of healing in wider society.

We heard a strong call for the church to restore its own unity and to speak with one voice in order to be a credible witness for justice and peace. In many of the meetings representatives from the EFZ and ZCBC were present, and this was a very positive sign. Repeatedly they emphasized the desire to work together and seek to provide a united voice. We welcome and applaud this, and we look forward this continuing commitment to work together. In the many groups we met with a key part of their call to the churches was that the Church should regain its space in public discourse. There was acknowledgement that the ZCC has made some efforts, but there was also frank recognition that the ZCC has been falling short in providing clear-minded leadership. With the current political stalemate and impasse there is a desperate desire for the church to take the lead in providing a non-partisan platform for discussion and dialogue on issues of national importance.

Key issues that were identified include areas such as the land issue, the constitution, media, human rights, etc. In this report we wish to highlight the importance of dealing with these topics, but we are consciously not providing additional analysis here, as we note that the church has previously produced comprehensive reflection and analysis (i.e. “The Truth Shall Set You Free” from the gathering in Victoria Falls in July 2001 and “The Zimbabwe We Want” from the gathering in Kariba in August 2004). Unfortunately documents such as these have not been shared and discussed widely within the churches. The church in Zimbabwe has been courageous at times in naming the problems, but the polarization and divisions within the church appear to have prevented it from moving forward. In spite of this people still place a great deal of hope in the church. Many felt that the church was the only option left, and they urged the church to claim its space in the public dialogue.

Fear, Intimidation, Insecurity

To keep faith with many of those who have shared with us we are compelled to report that fear, insecurity, intimidation, and surveillance by security forces is not just a concern in the larger society in Zimbabwe, but they also manifest themselves in the church as well. We found this to be occurring at all levels of the church, from the local level to the highest levels of the council itself. Even members of the ZCC have been harassed and threatened with acts of violence. Many report that they do not feel supported and often feel betrayed. It is clear that people at all levels are afraid. People are afraid of being victims of attacks and abuse by forces of law and order. People are afraid of the possibility of another decree by the forces of law and order which will fast track changes and rely on force for implementation. People are afraid to speak to one another about ordinary things. Pastors are afraid to speak about the current crisis for fear that there will be people in the congregation who will report them, and they will be invited by security operatives to account for what they have said. Pastors and church leaders are afraid to talk freely with each other, fearing that what they say will be reported. We received testimony from some who did speak out who reported that their houses were entered and their papers searched and sometimes destroyed. This had led to a culture of silence, and it has hampered the ability of the church to witness to truth and justice.

Violence and Possibility of Further Violence

In addition to the prevalence of fear among people we were also alarmed by the prevalence of violence. While it may be true that overt violence has decreased in recent years, with the exception of *Operation Murambatsvina*, there are troubling warning signs of the eruption of violence on an alarming scale. There are certain signs that tend to occur in patterns which have led in to the massive violations of human rights and massive violence in other countries, and we see many of these signs currently in Zimbabwe. One of the signs is the institutionalising of violence as an instrument of coercion. Another sign is the disappearance of persons where this is used as a means of intimidation and control. We were told of a number of cases where people have disappeared in the *Operation Murambatsvina*. Yet another sign is the increasing reports of youth being trained with military tactics and increasingly operating as militias. Further, the high unemployment rates (approximately 80-85%), especially among youth is another dangerous sign, and people who are desperate and see little hope for the future are more likely to be manipulated and resort to violence.

Recommendations/Way Forward

Regarding the current humanitarian crisis:

First, in recognition of the overwhelming humanitarian needs we call upon the international community to respond immediately in whatever ways possible. Regardless of the causes of the crisis many people, especially the poorest and most vulnerable, are suffering, and effective ways need to be found to assist them. We support the call we heard from many for the formation of a pressure group of church

bodies in Zimbabwe to lobby government on free import and distribution of food. Further, we call upon the government of Zimbabwe to implement immediately its promises to provide acceptable alternative housing to those displaced by Operation Murambatvina.

To the Churches and Ecumenical Community in Zimbabwe:

In relation to the issue of fear and intimidation we urge the ZCC, EFZ, and SCBC to put in place mechanisms for the protection of pastors and church workers who do have the courage to speak the truth. When they face intimidation and threats of violence there should be a rapid response system which will advocate for their protection. Further, the mechanisms should also have provision for rapidly informing the international ecumenical community, so that efforts can be made from many corners to insure their safety and protection.

We urge the churches to continue and intensify their efforts to work together and speak with one voice. There is a need for reconciliation and healing in Zimbabwe. The church needs to take the lead in promoting, but the church cannot hope to heal and reconcile the nation if remains divided and polarized. It is essential for the ZCC, the EFZ, the ZCBC, and other churches to speak with one voice.

We urge the Church in Zimbabwe to claim its rightful space in the public discourse of issues of national importance. Solid documents such as the Pastoral Letter entitled "The Truth Shall Make Us Free" (Victoria Falls, July 2001) and "The Zimbabwe We Want" (Kariba, August 2004) show that the church has reflected critically on vital issues such as land, constitution, law and order, HIV and AIDS, the media, economics and politics. We urge the church to take these documents and others like them to its congregations where they can be discussed and can serve as a spring board for informing a national dialogue.

Regarding the issue of violence we urge churches both in Zimbabwe and internationally to take seriously the warning signs mentioned. They point to increasing levels of violence. Lessons can be learned from patterns that have been followed in other countries, and we urge the churches to engage more fully in the opportunities offered in such programmes as the WCC's Decade to Overcome Violence.

To the Churches and Ecumenical Community in the Region:

We support and recommend the numerous requests which we heard for churches in the region to talk to their governments and urge them to intensify the search for a peaceful and just resolution to the current crisis in Zimbabwe. We support the efforts made by FOCCISA and others, and we urge them to continue their accompaniment and expressions of concern and solidarity.

To the Churches and Ecumenical Community Internationally:

We strongly support the call we heard for the international community to support and accompany the people of Zimbabwe. Specifically there was a request that the international community, especially WCC and AACC, assist in creating a platform for dialogue between stakeholders from both parties as well as a broad range of civil

society. Further, there was a desire expressed for strengthening capacity in regards to theological reflection on mediation, peace-building and conflict transformation, as well as advocacy. We urge the churches and ecumenical community internationally to respond favourably and accompany the people and churches of Zimbabwe in this difficult time.

Finally, we call upon churches around the world to continue to lift up the churches and people of Zimbabwe in prayer. They are not alone in their suffering. When they suffer we all suffer. In addition to this message of solidarity we lift up the message of hope, "Behold, I make all things new (Rev. 21:5)." We pray for God's guidance for the churches in Zimbabwe and for their leaders that they may be instruments of God's healing and reconciliation. May God bless Zimbabwe and may Zimbabwe be a land where peace, justice and the abundance of life flourish.