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A Non-Violent Presence in Afghanistan – Reflection Paper

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*⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
⁵² he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.”*
(*excerpted from the Magnificat – Luke 1:51-53, ESV*)

Who am I in the Context:

From 1994-2013 I served as a Maryknoll lay missionary in Japan, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and the USA. Since 2014 and presently as Mennonite Central Committee international service worker based in Kabul, Afghanistan I am an Advisor to the peacebuilding project of International Assistance Mission (IAM), a Christian NGO, with a 50 year presence in country. I humbly venture that my life journey and work as a peacebuilder are intertwined within the principles of non-violent presence and living. It is in my current role and experience that I present this reflection paper.

In the canticle above excerpted from the Magnificat, Mary grounds herself within the community of the oppressed, of which she is a member. Mary is the beacon for God’s plan to turn upside down the social hierarchy of the world order, of wealth and poverty, power and subjugation. God’s covenant of love and mercy is an assurance of this new world order. Mary, prophet for the new age, heralds the new order –she is spokesperson for God’s restorative justice. The question before me and us all called to be peacebuilders and co-creators of this vision is ‘What are the means towards this end?’

The Context of Violence in Afghanistan:

My journey in faith brought me to Afghanistan, plagued by war over the last four decades. Shows of strength and power exacerbate and protract the cycles of violence that have direct, structural and cultural manifestations. Direct violence is most visible in the active fighting between government forces and/or local security forces and armed opposition groups in many of Afghanistan’s provinces. In the Afghan capital, Kabul City where I live, interspersed with the periods of quiet and are the suicide bombers’ explosions targeting government officials, Afghan National Security Forces, international forces, foreign NGO and security sector individuals/guest houses and more recently civilians. Afghanistan’s third largest city, Herat whose founding dates back to 550-330 BC, in 2014-2015 has experienced over 50 targeted shootings of individuals including the 2015 abduction of a Jesuit priest, subsequently released. Currently swathes of territory in Baghlan province to the north are under siege from opposition forces – damage from raging battles has severely restricted the supply of electricity to all of Afghanistan.

At the interpersonal and community levels, violence rates, particularly for women, are high. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) reported that in a 9 month period from September 2014 to June 2015 there were 4,250 reported cases of violence against women in Afghanistan, however it is assumed that many more cases go unreported.¹ Oxfam reports that 87% of Afghan women experience some form of abuse or forced marriage in their lifetime.² The following types of violence against women have been reported: beatings, torture, rape, murders, forced self-immolations, forced marriage, giving Bad (retribution of a woman for a murder, to restore peace), and verbal/psychological abuse.³ In 2013, AIHRC reported 240 cases of honor killings.⁴

Structural violence can be defined as “the disabilities, disparities, and even deaths that result when systems, institutions, or policies meet some people’s needs and rights at the expense of others.”⁵ One example would be in the justice realm where certain laws rather than being a deterrent allow impunity for perpetrators of violence against women or the plague of corruption within the justice system which allows impunity for perpetrators of violence of all kinds.⁶ A recent example could be the secret meeting in Kabul of justice officials that overturned the death sentences for the four men charged with the murder of Farkhunda, a young woman brutally killed by a mob near a Kabul shrine after being falsely accused of burning the Koran. This occurred after the completion of a long public trial.

A second example is the corruption in several governmental institutions where power and wealth is consolidated into the hands of a few powerful people who then determine how the needs of others with less power are met. This contributes to widening disparities between rich and poor.

A third example of structural violence would be the unequal distribution of resources particularly between urban and rural areas. This can be the result of powerful individuals bestowing favors on some areas and not on others, fighting that prevents humanitarian aid organizations from reaching impoverished areas, development organizations that do not follow conflict-sensitive Do No Harm principles or armed groups that deliberately block the flow of resources into certain areas. Included in this would be lack of schools in rural areas, particularly for girls.

¹<http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2015/02/16/4250-cases-of-violence-against-women-in-nine-months-aihrc.html>

²<https://www.oxfam.org/en/countries/afghan-women-police-should-protect-not-abuse>

³ The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission is an excellent resource for reports. This one is from 2013 on violence against women. <http://www.aihrc.org.af/media/files/PDF/Violence%20against%20women%20Eng.pdf>

⁴<http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2013/06/10/aihrc-400-rape-honor-killings-registered-in-afghanistan-in-2-years.html>

⁵ See Lisa Schirch, The Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding: A vision and framework for peace with justice. (Intercourse, Pennsylvania: Good Books, 2004) p. 22.

⁶ See the Human Rights Watch report, *“Today We Shall All Die:” Afghanistan’s Strongmen and the Legacy of Impunity*. (March 2015).

A fourth example of structural violence impacting Afghanistan is the way global development policies bring benefits to richer nations exacerbating the unequal distribution of wealth, making recipient nations even poorer.⁷

Cultural violence includes the attitudes and beliefs that legitimize direct and structural violence and teach us about the power and necessity of violence.⁸ In Afghanistan, because of the four decades of intense violence that people have experienced, those under 40 years of age have not known a time their country has not been at war. Violent solutions to conflict are witnessed daily. Those who kill are made into heroes or martyrs by both sides in the current conflict. Guns are a common and acceptable feature of life in most areas of Afghanistan. Impunity is also a symptom of the cultural violence prevalent in Afghan society—a collective fear and acceptance of the rights of the powerful.

Cultural violence is evident in the way people internalize or normalize the violence or systems of violence around them. For example, a UNICEF study showed that 92% Afghan women believe that husbands have the right to beat their wives in specific instances.⁹ The violence is legitimized through the attitudes, the patriarchal beliefs and structure of society, as well as how those attitudes translate into law, whether secular or religious.

We recognize that the perpetration of violence does not happen in isolation but is often linked directly to the experience of violence. Individuals, communities, and whole societies can be caught up in cycles of violence, unless deliberate steps are taken to break out of the cycle.¹⁰ Afghan National Security Forces are stretched in their response to incidents ranging from targeted attacks on international interests to abductions and attacks on Afghan communities.

Strengths and Opportunities created by Active Non-Violent Response:

The culture and philosophy of active non-violence shaped our Peacebuilding Project activities dedicated to the goal of greater peace and stability in Afghan homes, communities and organizations. We look at opportunities and gateways for peace that exist in the Afghan culture, traditions and that lie embedded in the Islamic faith expression. The pathways created by active nonviolent response give voice to and build capacity of the majority that choose the path of active non-violence. It is our hope that the activities described below enhance opportunities for peace.

Participants value diversity in their communities, accept, appreciate and celebrate it!

The Afghan society is characterized by diversity. Afghanistan is made up of seven major ethnic groups—Pashtun 42%, Tajik 27%, Hazara 9%, Uzbek 9%, Aimaq 4%, Turkmen 3%, and Balochand 2%. These percentages are a point of contestation between ethnic groups as there is

⁷ See the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law, and Development video, “The Road to Development Justice.” <http://apwld.org/the-road-to-development-justice/>

⁸ See Johan Galtung, *Cultural Violence*. (*Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 27, No. 3. (Aug., 1990), pp. 291-305.)

⁹ <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2012/afghanistan-domestic-violence.aspx>

¹⁰ See Carolyn Yoder, *The Little Book of Trauma Healing: When Violence Strikes and Community is Threatened*. (Intercourse, Pennsylvania: Good Books, 2005).

not an independently conducted census that is reliable. Pashai, Nuristani, Gujjar, Arab, Brahui, and Pamiri are additional ethnic groups present in smaller numbers. The main languages are Pashtu and Dari but there are also numerous minority languages such as Aimaq, Arabic, Ashkun, Baluchi, Gujari, Hazaragi, Kazaki, Moghili, Uzbeki, Turkmani, Pashai, Nuristani, and Pamiri. Islam is the national religion, although Sikhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Sufism are also present. Amongst the Muslims, the majority are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school, a smaller number of Shi'a, and few Twelver (Imamis) and Ismaili Muslims.¹¹ Afghanistan has been able to hold its ethnic diversity in balance for centuries, possibly through oppressive means, but also through networks of relationships that emerge when people live in close proximity. Civil society groups also speak about the importance of rising above ethnic divisions.

Throughout our work, we are sensitive to the need for building a language and a culture of diversity in Afghanistan. We challenge ourselves and others to answer the question: How can we promote diversity within our current work? Our educational programming will be work towards building trust and reduce prejudice. Specifically, we build relationships with a school that attracts a diverse population. We aim to work closely with administrators, teachers, and students on aspects of peacebuilding, particularly as it relates to celebrating diversity.

Participants' awareness is raised about cycles of violence and trauma healing and the importance of those concepts in building peace in their communities:

The last 40 years of war have impacted the mental health of Afghans. In one of the only mental health surveys conducted in Afghanistan, this research from 2002 found that 62% of the respondents experienced at least four trauma events in the previous ten years.¹² These trauma events included lack of food and water, lack of shelter, imprisonment, serious injury, sudden fleeing, forced separation from family, murder of family members, and rape, to name a few. Over 60% reported that they were experiencing depression and anxiety. Over 40% had symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Feelings of hatred were high for over 80% of the respondents.

Our work integrates concepts of trauma healing and cycles of violence into our peacebuilding curriculum. At the same time we look for ways to partner with organizations that have Community Mental Health Programming so as make closer connections between addressing mental health issues and healing collectively from historical trauma.

Participants are using conflict resolution skills in their day to day life:

Tensions between Traditional and Modern Cultures

Tensions between traditional and modern cultural norms contribute to conflict in Afghanistan. These conflicts can emerge at different levels in society from the family level as younger generations challenge the older generations, to the national level as armed groups rooted in the traditional culture threaten those who are attempting to change the culture.

Five cultural tensions impact people's lives: 1. the emphasis on shame and honor, though this is slowly changing. New generations are more interested in right/wrong beliefs.¹³ 2. the clash in traditional and modern norms in the expression of views and opinions 3. the power exerted by the lens of religion and religious beliefs influence peoples life actions and their response to conflict. Everything is evaluated through the filter of religion. However, for those who are not

¹¹<http://www.minorityrights.org/5429/afghanistan/afghanistan-overview.html>

¹²See Barbara Lopes Cardozo, *Mental Health, Social Functioning and Disability in Postwar Afghanistan*. (The Journal of the American Medical Association: August 4, 2004, Vol 292 No 5).

¹³ See Roland Muller, Honor and Shame in a Middle Easter Setting. <http://nabataea.net/h%26s.html>

educated or who live in rural areas, these religious beliefs may stem more from the beliefs of the local Mullah who holds a lot of power in rural and traditional areas. The people the Mullah leads may not know that they are not following the true teachings of Islam. In modern cultures, people practice Islam according to their own readings of the Quran and the Hadith, but they may not understand the essence of why they are doing it or how they should do it. Islamic principles of non-violence and peacebuilding are a religious framework for rooting practice within a context of non-violent response 4. Traditional beliefs value family but the modern culture is more interested in power and money. 5. In the traditional culture, government and religion should be closely linked. In the modern culture, people are calling for a separation between the two. The goal of our activities is to provide tools, resources, spaces and processes that contribute to a just peace. In a society that has over its history of forty years been embedded in conflict, a just peace calls for establishment of mechanisms that will promote a culture of non-violent resolution of conflict. Our Project promotes practices that apply indigenous methods and tools that are culturally and religiously appropriate in teaching about and resolving conflicts. It is deliberate in creating, promoting, and facilitating these methods for peace education and peacebuilding strategy. The Project incorporates Islamic principles of non-violence into its peacebuilding work – Islamic non-violence principles exhort adherents to non-violent practice and living. The Project seeks to understand and build upon this platform in the performance of its work. It promotes the incorporation of peacebuilding processes into Shuras and Jurgas, community-based institutions that are intertwined with the lives of people in Afghanistan.

Where and how do 'we' need to Focus Attention for the practice of Non-violence in the Catholic Community:

1. Focus within our own structures:
 - what in our structures is inherently violent and allows for the permutation of violence?
 - what in the social hierarchy needs to be turned upside down in order for the practice of non-violence to take root?
 - promote what in our doctrine, scripture, tradition, fosters the practice of non-violence
2. Institutionalize principles and practice of non-violence:
 - work in partnership with other faith traditions that have adopted and practiced principles of active non-violence
 - institutionalize the principles and practice of non-violence in Catholic institutions including schools, colleges, universities and catholic communities
3. People of influence – the web concept:
 - connect people of influence, living and practicing non-violence at all levels including individual, community, church, organizational creating a web of change agents that foster to a culture of non-violence practice
 - dedicate resources to a 'stock exchange' of people and practice resources which can be dipped into at all times, particularly in conflict areas