

Mennonite Brethren Church of India: Transforming Conflict

Peace is considered a precious gift in today's world. A society without conflicts is unusual, but legitimate conflict resolution is a practical element of a healthy society. Peacebuilding has been central to Mennonite life and identity, and offering a peace witness is a core Mennonite activity. Mennonites have gained a reputation as peacemakers that has often shaped their public identity. Since its inception in 1889, the Mennonite Brethren Church of India (MBCI) has been participating in peacebuilding in the southern state of Telangana. MBCI works to help individuals, communities, and societies transform the way they perceive and manage conflicts—a core component of peacebuilding. Peacebuilding aims to create sustainable peace by addressing the root causes of violent conflict, and by eliciting indigenous capacities for peaceful management and resolution of conflict.

MBCI Peacebuilding Initiatives

Peacebuilding is a dynamic social construct. Through various initiatives, MBCI has played a significant role in peacebuilding in Telangana State. Two of these initiatives are the M.B. Centenary Bible College and the Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution Studies.

M.B. Centenary Bible College (MBCBC)

Located in Shamshabad, 18 km (11 miles) south of Hyderabad, the College developed out of various MBCI Bible training programs. The Annual General Body of MBCI, which met in December 1988¹ in view of the need of more highly educated theological leaders, decided to establish the College, which would offer a Bachelor of Theology degree, in the church's centenary year, 1989. In June 2003, all the church's theological training programs were folded into the program of MBCBC.

In order to promote peace education, MBCBC introduced a peacebuilding course entitled "Anabaptist Mennonite History and Peace Theology" at the baccalaureate level in 2003. This course explores how 16th-century Anabaptist believers recovered a Jesus-centered practice of defenceless discipleship amidst European Christendom. It also tracks the

¹ The Governing Council of the Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of India, Minutes of the Annual General Body Meeting, December 2, 1988.

development of a coherent Anabaptist peace theology through two centuries of struggle with established religious and civil authorities who sought to destroy this emerging early peace church.

Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution Studies (CPCRS)

Since March 2004, MBCI has been involved in imparting peace education through this center at the MBCBC campus.² The main function is to teach conflict resolution in order to promote peace for leaders irrespective of religion or status, through short-term workshops and one-year diploma programs. Other programs include a community education project, adult education, workshops on anger management, and hygienic and medical camps. Important challenges in teaching conflict resolution include ethnic conflicts and caste issues in society and church, and limited resources (inadequate literature on peace and conflict resolution studies in vernacular languages, a shortage of trained teachers).

CPCRS students include teachers, lecturers, lawyers, police and military officials, evangelists, pastors, church elders, social workers, government officials, and individuals working with non-government organizations. After completing the program, students continue their respective jobs. Using their skills, they are peacefully resolving conflicts at their workplaces and in their communities.

Emmanuel Masku, a graduate and a social worker, observes that “Everyday conflicts can escalate into violence if we do not learn to solve them peacefully. Conflict resolution skills, which I learned at the Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution Studies, were indeed very helpful to peacefully resolve conflicts between slum school children in Hyderabad.” He adds that “Conflicts between slum school students are a normal part of growing up, but left unchecked, peer problems can interrupt class time, cause emotional stress, and derail students’ learning. Moreover, conflicts among slum students can quickly become violent. However, giving my students some simple problem-solving tools—such as: identify the problems, define and discuss the problems, summarize progress, explore solutions, and implement the solutions—help school children work through peer conflicts *before* they

² Dalton Reimer, “A New Centre for Peace Studies Established by The Conference of The Mennonite Brethren Church of India,” Report, June 1, 2004.

interfere with academics and lead to bigger social-emotional challenges.”³

Conflicts are part of life, and each individual as well as society have to face them. MBCI has dual responsibilities: first, to solve conflicts; and second, to proclaim the message of peace and to participate in peacebuilding programs at large. In a world ravaged by violence, it is not easy to be a Peace Church, a church dedicated to the ways of Christ’s peace. These ways require much intentionality, persistence, and even sacrifice. The Bible reminds us that every Christian needs to sow in peace in order to see the fruit of righteousness, which is closely related to the principle of justice (James 3:18; Matt. 5: 9). Moreover, in this world of chaos and conflicts, we are called to be peacemakers, not peacebreakers!

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Emergency Preparedness Response Teams: Jos, Nigeria

Four days before the “the world changed” on September 11, 2001, the state of “peace and tourism” in Plateau State, Nigeria, and particularly in its capital, Jos, was broken. Latent tensions between communities defined simplistically but effectively along religious lines (Christian versus Muslim) erupted into several days of violence. During this period of bloodletting and property destruction, hundreds of people were killed. The city’s former mixed neighborhoods of Christians and Muslims became ghettos of people from one tradition or the other, separated by fear. Conflicts flared up both in the city and countryside in the years following, displacing many people from their homes. Gopar Tapkida, a Nigerian Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) peace worker recently returned from graduating with an MA in Conflict Transformation from Eastern Mennonite University, felt overwhelmed by the task at hand.

Father Anthony Fom suffered deep personal losses in the conflict.

³ Interview with Emmanuel Masku, Hyderabad, Telangana State, India, August 5, 2017.