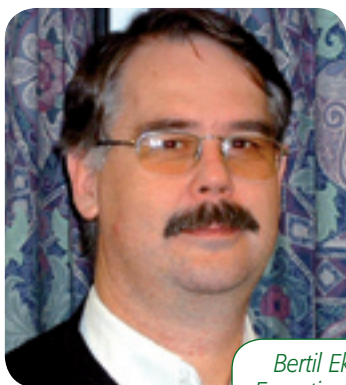


From my corner...



*Bertil Ekström
Executive Director*

Persecution has always been part of the expansion of the Gospel. As a child, I remember stones being thrown, by orders of the Catholic priest, at the tent my father raised to start a new church in one of the neighbourhoods in Campinas—incidentally the same area where my office is now. Swedish missionaries had invaded Catholic territory, ignoring any “comity” law, and in the early 1960’s there was no dialogue between Evangelicals and Catholics in Brazil. Thirty years later I experienced the same hostility from representatives of the majority church when preaching in the interior of Paraguay.

The scenario of violence, suffering and persecution is of course much more complex than the stoning of a rival Christian group that more or less aggressively challenges the established church. On the other hand, the fact that not even Christians can handle conflict situations without using violence shows the decadence of humanity and the triumph of the Enemy, dividing families, clans, tribes, religious groups and nations. There was something prophetic about the conflict between Cain and Abel as a preview of what would

characterise humanity after the fall. Later, the sins of Abraham would create a new pair of brother-conflict between Isaac and Ishmael, with consequences felt up to today. Brother against brother, tribe against tribe, nation against nation, religious groups against other religious groups.

Some would like to paint the conflicts in pure spiritual terms and identify particular nations and religious groups with Satan. Automatically some of our nations should be considered representatives of the Christian faith and bearers of a “manifest destiny” of saving the world. Unfortunately, the sinful mind and the lack of true love have affected us all. As Evangelicals we believe that the transforming message of Jesus Christ is the only truth and that the whole world needs to be confronted by it. However, that does not give us the right to neglect our own evil behaviour in relation to others, independent on which religion they profess or nation they belong to.

As I write this text, the conflicts in Kenya and in Chad are matter of deep concern. Friends of ours, many of them linked to the Mission Commission, are suffering, and their families are among the victims of uncontrolled violence. Many other examples could be mentioned of unnecessary suffering owing to the interest of a few who want to dominate over others. It is not uncommon for outside economic and political interests to have a strong influence in the conflicts, and innocent people pay with their lives as marionettes in the hands of despotic leaders in the globalised theatre of power. But

also, unresolved historical tensions, colonialism legacies, the nation-state system that forces ethnic groups into the same government and divides others between political nations, and the advance of religious groups using violent means to convert people have also played a significant role in creating situations of discord and war.

The blend of religious, economic and political motives has given many throughout history the excuse for armed conflict. It seems that the submission or even extermination of those who think differently is the only way for some religious paladins to accomplish their mission. The Christian message, however, says something completely different. The apostle Paul affirms that Christ “*came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near*” (Ephesians 2:17). Both Jews and Gentiles were objects of the same message of peace. And Paul continues to say that the result was the reconciliation between both peoples and that both now have access to the Father. Incidentally (or maybe not), I have an Arabic bookmark on that page of my Bible. As Christians, we continu-

ally need to be reminded of the counter-culture that the Gospel represents and the ministry of reconciliation that we have been entrusted with.

This issue of Connections focuses on the whole issue of persecution, suffering, violence and martyrdom. Many of our sisters and brothers are really suffering because of their faithfulness to the Lord. Others are victims of violence resulting from armed conflicts and the high rate of criminality in many of our cities of the Global South. Independent of the reasons for suffering, we need to stand together as a Christian worldwide family, praying for each other but also fighting together for justice, peace and for the coming of the Kingdom in its fullness. <<

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