

Behind the news: Visions for peace – Voices of faith

Issue no. 12

20 December 2001

Providing church, ecumenical and interfaith information, resources, and analysis on issues of current global concern

Table of Contents

- 1. Background to “Behind the News: Visions for Peace – Voices of Faith”**
- 2. Christmas Message**
- 3. Statements and actions of the global church and ecumenical family**
- 4. Responses from other faith communities**
- 5. Summaries of inter-governmental response**
- 6. Humanitarian concerns**
- 7. Contributions to the current debate**
- 8. Resources for worship and study**
- 9. Calls for action**

1. Background

In response to the threatening global situation in the wake of the September 11 attacks in the United States, Action by Churches Together (ACT), the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA) and the World Council of Churches (WCC), have set up a short-term response mechanism to offer a selection of statements, useful information, thought-provoking reflections, and worship resources which might aid churches in responding to the unfolding situation. This weekly bulletin contains summaries and references to selected resources that can be found through our web site at <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/behindthenews>. There is additional information on the web site than may not necessarily be referred to in the bulletin.

Please feel free to share this bulletin widely by e-mail and in hard copy. We apologize if you are receiving duplicate copies of this bulletin due to the multiple distribution lists we are using. We appreciate feedback on what you find helpful and what other information you may need. Please contact us at: bulletins@wcc-coe.org

This is the last edition of *Behind the news: Visions for peace - Voices of Faith* for 2001. The next issue will be distributed in January 2002.

2. Christmas Message

Celebrating Christmas in our world today.

"Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? ... When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled.... He sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region.... A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more. "

Matt: 2: 2, 3, 16, & 18.

The ecumenical news bulletin, *Behind the News*, took shape in response to a series of crises that began on September 11. Rooted in the conviction that it is our Christian responsibility to uphold alternative possibilities for peace in a world that is, more often than not, guided by the prescriptions of the powerful, the initiative has also been

called *Visions for Peace - Voices of Faith*.

A common feature of these crises - and also, sadly, of our everyday lives - is the suffering of the innocent, whether in the US, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Middle East and elsewhere, and the legitimization of this suffering. The world continues to be confronted by sets of values aimed at legitimizing the repressive power of the state, the suppression of dissent, and faith in military solutions. What is deplorable is the way some powers use religion, international diplomacy, and the media to promote these values.

This Christmas, we are perhaps more sensitive to the fact that we face a moral crisis that threatens to radically change the way we relate to each other and how we hold one another accountable as human beings in a world increasingly led by the values and visions of political and economic powers. We approach Christmas this year - a time of celebration that takes place in most parts of the world - at a moment when many people are in mourning and feel threatened. On the face of it, it may seem to many people that there are presently more reasons to mourn than to celebrate.

But enormous suffering of the innocent also marked the birth of Jesus. Thousands of children were killed, and many people, including Jesus, became refugees. More than 2000 years ago, King Herod attempted to eliminate all possible threats to his supremacy; today similar processes continue. Millions of people are oppressed, exploited and excluded all over the world as the powerful ensure that their interests are taken care of.

Therefore, as we approach Christmas this year and continue to hear about and encounter the vulnerable, the threatened, and the displaced, we are faced with moral and spiritual challenges to uphold visions and ways of peace that reveal how the powerful impose suffering on the powerless. And we are called to uphold justice as a precondition for peace, and to continue to build alliances of peace in a troubled world.

The birth of Jesus was a powerful affirmation of life amidst the violence of King Herod's rule. Christmas reminds us yearly that God's power is present even in the powerlessness of the vulnerable, and that we are called to sustain life and hope through our actions. This is the challenge that accompanies us as we prepare to celebrate Christmas - a time to overcome violence by working towards a world of peace and justice.

Deenabandhu Manchala
Coordinator, Decade to Overcome Violence

3. Statements and actions of the global church and ecumenical family

a) The Rev. Dr Robert W. Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches in the USA, issued the following message in anticipation of the end of Ramadan and the beginning of 'Id al-Fitr', observed on December 16 (December 15 in some communities). In his message <http://www.nccusa.org/news/01news111.html>, he prays that people of faith will find solace in the presence and mercy of God, and in each other.

b) In a message to celebrate the World Day of Peace on 1 January 2002, His Holiness Pope John Paul II writes that there is no peace without justice and no justice without forgiveness.

“...in the present circumstances, how can we speak of justice and forgiveness as the source and condition of peace? *We can and we must*, no matter how difficult this may be; a difficulty which often comes from thinking that justice and forgiveness are irreconcilable. But forgiveness is the opposite of resentment and revenge, not of justice. In fact, true peace is 'the work of justice' (*Is 32:17*).

True peace therefore is the fruit of justice, that moral virtue and legal guarantee which ensures full respect for rights and responsibilities, and the just distribution of benefits and burdens. But because human justice is always fragile and imperfect, subject as it is to the limitations and egoism of individuals and groups, it must include and, as it were, be completed by the *forgiveness, which heals and rebuilds troubled human relations from their foundations.*" For the full text, visit

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20011211_xxxv-world-day-for-peace_en.html

c) In an intense three-day conference held recently in the USA by the Episcopal Church, participants grappled with the underlying causes of conflict between Christianity and Islam in many parts of the world. Over a year ago, plans were laid for a conference on reconciliation; these plans have assumed a new urgency in the wake of the attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

<http://www.episcopalchurch.org/ens/2001-350.html>

d) National Council of Churches USA general secretary Rev. Dr Robert W. Edgar was among some 70 Christians, Muslims and Jews who shared a traditional Muslim *Iftar* meal and a time of dialogue on December 6 at Union Theological Seminary in New York. The event took place during Ramadan, the holy month in the Islamic lunar calendar when Muslims fast during daylight hours. The *Iftar* meal breaks the day's fast after sunset prayers.

"If September 11 had not happened, would we be here together, breaking bread and listening to each other?" Edgar asked in a panel discussion following the vegetarian meal. "In my theology, God did not cause this tragic event, but God helps us use tragic events to heal wounds... God is opening some doors for us in the shadow of September 11." Edgar called on participants of all faiths "to learn together, to walk together, pray together, be seen together, and model better behavior to the world".

<http://www.nccusa.org/news/01news113.html>

e) Churches for Peace: Since September 11, churches in the Gulf have continuously prayed for peace and a series of united services for peace have been organized in Dubai. During the week of Christian Unity (January 2000), peace will be one of the main themes. Afghanistan, Palestine and Israel, Iraq, India and Pakistan, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Sudan and Nigeria are all examples of countries where violence and conflict are experienced daily To read more about the Middle East Council of Churches' concern on these issues, click on: www.mecchurches.org

f) In the aftermath of the September 11 tragedy, Church World Service (CWS) and the Conflict Transformation Program (CTP) at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU)

have announced a university-based training programme to equip religious leaders in congregations affected by trauma. The two-year programme, which is expected to begin in early 2002, is sponsored by Church World Service and the denominational members of the CWS Emergency Response Program Committee.

<http://www.emu.edu/ctp/star-news.html>

h) Christians and Muslims look at the impact of September 11 on dialogue: Three meetings on Christian-Muslim dialogue at local, regional and international levels will take place in Cairo, 17-21 December. An informal meeting between World Council of Churches (WCC) staff and about 30 local Christian and Muslim leaders will consider the educational use in the local context of a recent WCC publication *Striving Together in Dialogue: A Muslim-Christian Call to Reflection and Action*. For more information, click on: <http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/news/press/01/47pre.html>

i) When faith leaders in Florida decided to hold their first interfaith gathering in late September, they chose a church that could hold 350 people. "We thought that would be plenty of room," remembered the Rev. Fred Morris, executive director of the Florida Council of Churches. But the church was bursting at the seams. "It was standing room only," said Morris, "and we knew then that this was important enough to do it again." Thus began a pattern of bridge-building in Florida that has moved across multiple faiths and into people's hearts. An interfaith committee formed and now meets weekly to plan more events.

<http://www.disasternews.net/news/news.php?articleid=1335>

4. Responses from other faith communities

a) Where the Violence Comes From: "There is never any justification for acts of terror against innocent civilians - it is the quintessential act of dehumanization and not recognizing the sanctity of others, and a visible symbol of a world increasingly irrational and out of control. It's understandable why many of us, after grieving and consoling the mourners, will feel anger - and while some demagogues in Congress have already sought to manipulate that feeling into a growing militarism (more spies, legalize assassinations of foreign leaders, increase the defense budget at the expense of domestic programs), the more "responsible" leaders are seeking to narrow America's response to targeted attacks on countries that allegedly harbor the terrorists." So writes Rabbi Michael Lerner of Beyt Tikkun Synagogue in San Francisco. For the full text, visit: <http://groups.colgate.edu/aarislam/lerner.htm>

5. Summaries of inter-governmental response

a) The principal donor countries, representatives of international organizations and non-governmental organizations and the countries bordering Afghanistan gathered in Berlin on 5/6 December for the [annual conference of the Afghanistan Support Group](#). The meeting, which was opened by German federal foreign minister Joschka Fischer and the UN secretary-general's special representative, Lakhdar Brahimi, among others, was given a boost by the results of the Petersberg talks, which had been successfully concluded shortly beforehand. On the agenda were a host of questions relating to humanitarian aid and reconstruction in Afghanistan, two issues that are complementary and mutually reinforcing. Visit http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/www/en/aussenpolitik/humanitaere_hilfe/ausgabe_archiv?archiv_id=2444&be

[reich_id=7&type_id=2](#) for the full text of the media release, as well as links to other relevant documents and information.

6. Humanitarian concerns

a) There are some 20 million refugees in the world. Their life options are: repatriation, local integration, remaining in refugee camps or resettlement to a third country. Less than 1% attain resettlement. Sponsorship of refugees and individuals in need of protection and for whom there is no other durable solution is a necessary mission of the church. Congregations undertaking sponsorship assume moral and, in most cases, financial responsibilities for refugees for the one- to two-year sponsorship term. Refugees must be determined (by Canada) to be both "eligible" and "admissible" for resettlement or admission into Canada. For more information, click on the following link on the United Church of Canada's website.

<http://www.uccan.org/jpc/migration/refugeesponsorship.asp>

b) Human Rights Watch warned that new anti-terrorism legislation adopted recently in the UK marks another step in its retreat from human rights and refugee protection obligations. A full version of the news release is available at

<http://www.hrw.org/press/2001/12/UKbill1214.htm>.

With reference to the rights of refugees, the organization (HRW) said that the governments that were meeting in Geneva to affirm their commitment to refugees (<http://www.hrw.org/press/2001/12/refconbg1211.htm>) have actually adopted laws and policies that undermine the letter and the spirit of the Refugee Convention.

<http://www.hrw.org/press/2001/12/refcon1211.htm>

c) **Winter closes in on families trapped by war.** Rory Carroll reports from Mamorick for the UK-based newspaper *The Guardian* on the plight of Afghans who are facing a bleak future. He writes, "The jeep crests another peak and finally the valley stretches below, a frozen wasteland of ice where nothing stirs. The village of Mamorick once thrived here but the mud-brick houses dotting the plain are now rubble ruins coated smooth and white by snow. There is a rumour among aid agencies that refugees in the mountains have returned to Mamorick, but it seems fanciful. There is nothing to return to." For a full version of the story, click on:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/afghanistan/story/0,1284,620905,00.html>

d) Delivering food aid to Afghanistan - beating the clock: After launching its first airbridge into Afghanistan this week, the World Food Programme (WFP) is now sending food aid into Afghanistan out of five countries - Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan & Uzbekistan - by road, rail, air and river. WFP is racing against time to replenish food stocks for millions of hungry Afghans and to pre-position food stocks before winter snow cuts off vital overland routes.

<http://www.wfp.org/index.asp?section=2>

e) For detailed information and reports on humanitarian concerns in Afghanistan, visit <http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/vLCE/Afghanistan?OpenDocument&StartKey=Afghanistan&Expandview>. ReliefWeb is a project of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

f) A report by UNICEF detailing the Afghanistan crisis donor update can be found at <http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/vID/626570E7EF28CEA3C1256B220055DDD7?OpenDocument>. Emergency operations continue and planning for recovery is

underway. Contents include: UNICEF's and partners' distribution of children's clothes, family kits, winter boots and plastic sheeting to internally displaced people, a measles campaign that aims to cover 7 million children in Afghanistan. The update reports that 39% of funding needs have been covered to date.

g) Relief efforts for Afghanistan received a boost as the United Nations and the Government of Uzbekistan agreed on measures to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance to northern Afghanistan by UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations. The agreement (<http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/UNID/69CDD25F4FB2D7C285256B2200779974?OpenDocument>), signed in Tashkent, is expected to accelerate administrative procedures to ensure that aid gets to Afghanistan's under-supplied provinces, including delivery across the recently opened Friendship Bridge. In news from the field, UN officials said there were some signs of stability and normalcy returning to parts of Afghanistan, including the return over the past week of more than 14,000 people to various parts of the country.
<http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/UNID/B21E7E3AB799A09985256B22007A121A>

h) The end of Ramadan this weekend saw several days of heavy rain, the first in many months, fall across most of drought-stricken Afghanistan. Snow now blankets the mountain ridges around Kabul, where the security situation is improving. The security situation is also gradually improving in Herat and Mazar. For the first time in many years, residents of Kabul, Kandahar, Mazar and Herat marked the *Eid* holidays with music concerts. For more on the latest UN press briefing in Kabul, on 18 December 2001, click on
<http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/UNID/A95450D68DCF5F5FC1256B26004B92B>
[B](#)

i) The UN high commissioner for refugees' (UNHCR) latest humanitarian update offers information on an upswing in the spontaneous return of Afghan, refugees that are still trickling into Pakistan, new distribution of relief aid in Kabul and fresh activities in northern and western Afghanistan.
<http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/UNID/D7408CAAD6EBA120C1256B2200565229>
[9](#)

j) The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) offers a detailed report on Afghanistan at the following site. The report, "Coordination in a fragmented State", includes a map of Afghanistan, UNOCA/UNOCHA mandates, a chronology of events and bibliography and references
http://www.reliefweb.int/ocha_ol/programs/unocha/afgrpt/annex.html

7. Contributions to the current debate

a) "A Religious Odyssey", an article written by Kevin Eckstrom, can be found at <http://www.wfn.org/2001/12/msg00137.html>. Last January, on a raw and dreary Inauguration Day in the nation's capital, America's 43rd president sketched out his vision of a religiously inclusive America. "Church and charity, synagogue and mosque, lend our communities their humanity, and they will have an honoured place in our plans and in our laws," said President George W. Bush, a conservative Christian who promised to welcome religious groups as Washington's partner.

b) "The Peacemakers Speak" is a web-based collection of the recent statements of Nobel Peace Laureates, including Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, HH the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, Oscar Arias, Mairead Maguire, Mikhail Gorbachev, Jose Ramos Horta and others on the current crisis. In addition to statements, there is a mailing list for updates. Visit: <http://www.thecommunity.com/crisis/>

c) In an exclusive interview in *Frontline*, India's national magazine, Noam Chomsky speaks to V.K. Ramachandran about the "new war against terrorism", imperialism, the media and the role of intellectuals.
<http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl1825/18250080.htm>

d) In "The Taliban of the West", an article by George Monbiot that appeared in the UK newspaper *The Guardian*, some troubling facts show, that in these times of war, the US might be tempted to renounce its most basic political freedoms. Montbiot relates the story of a 15-year-old girl from West Virginia who has been suspended from her high school and presented to a court because she founded an anarchy club and had a T-shirt on which was written "Against Bush, Against Bin Laden". He also mentions the case of a 19-year-old student of North Carolina who had problems with security agents because someone her in possession of "anti-American material" which consisted of a poster denouncing Bush's use of the death penalty. Monbiot lists a series of similar facts, and fears extensive use of surveillance technology, which could lead to a new form of political control. "This war is threatening the very freedoms it claims to be defending," he observes.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/Print/0,3858,4321856,00.html>

e) "A fairy tale at Christmas" is a bitter reflection on the media coverage of the war in Afghanistan. Madeleine Bunting disclaims the "straightforward moral narrative" of the war on terrorism. She also explains how behind propaganda and self-censorship, a quasi-doctrinal principle of US foreign policy - that legitimizes the fight against terrorism with even greater terror - has caused massive civilian deaths and produced four million refugees. "The US may have wanted to exact revenge, but it was never something anyone could claim to be morally right," she concludes.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/Print/0,3858,4321175,00.html>

f) "Will our constitutional rights be a casualty of war?" asks Jim Wallis in his op-ed piece at
http://www.sojo.net/news/index.cfm/action/display_archives/mode/current_opinion/article/CO_121201.html. "Those of us who were involved in the civil rights, anti-war, or Central America movements remember FBI surveillance and disruption programmes all too well. From the harassment of Dr Martin Luther King through the Vietnam era, what came to be known as 'COINTELPRO' employed break-ins, wiretaps, and other forms of harassment," he writes.

g) An article in *Dawn*, Pakistan's most widely circulated English language newspaper, reports that fundamentalism may have been weakened in Afghanistan, but it is by no means certain that even if Pakistan does not want it to be so, extremism will not creep back into the country. The best way to prevent this from happening will be to ensure that the reconstruction effort reaches every Afghan village and every Afghan citizen. Making a plea for broad-based rehabilitation of Afghan society, Mr. Qayyum Karzai, the US-based brother of Mr. Hamid Karzai, who takes over as head of the new

administration in Kabul, believes that Afghanistan needs politics based on realism. For more details, visit <http://www.dawn.com/2001/12/17/top8.htm>

8. Resources for worship and study

a) Two Mennonite professors responded to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and its aftermath with story and a song - now available on a compact disc, titled "Dream the Light". John Paul Lederach is the founder of Eastern Mennonite University's (EMU) Conflict Transformation Program, and a storyteller. He is currently professor of international peacebuilding at the Joan Kroc Institute of International Peace Studies at Notre Dame. He continues part time at EMU as a distinguished scholar. Herm Weaver is an assistant professor of psychology at EMU. His vocations include singing and song-writing. He is also a former pastor and roofer. "This CD is a small response to the escalating cycles of violence," said Lederach. "We don't have answers to the complex questions facing us. We do have faith. We have faith in a loving God and that small actions make a difference." For more information, go to www.dreamthelight.com

b) Many worship resources that include prayers, sermons and services can be found at the following site of the National Council of Churches (NCC) in the USA http://www.oates.org/pastoral_response/worship.html. Other NCC worship resources are located at <http://www.ncccusa.org/nmu/mce/crisis-worship-and-prayer.html>. The document is titled: "Finding Words for Unspeakable Tragedy: Resources for Ecumenical and Interfaith Worship and Prayer".

c) A guide for parents, pastors and Sunday school teachers on talking to children about terrorism can be found at <http://www.ncccusa.org/nmu/mce/childrenterrorism.html>. Ministries in Christian Education, a programme of the NCCCUSA, is compiling additional information to help with this important topic.

d) The Geneva Inter-religious Platform has a useful website with information on the basic facts and essential creeds of Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Bahaism. The Platform is presided over by Pastor Jean-Claude Basset, a professor at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Lausanne who is known for his deep commitment to interreligious dialogue. The website has an inter-religious calendar that is itself a didactic journey towards a greater understanding of the diverse faiths of the world. The site also details multiple activities and encounters organized by the Platform in Geneva to promote better dialogue and mutual comprehension between faith communities. In French at <http://www.interreligieux.ch>

e) Two University of California, Berkeley, graduate students in anthropology are generating international interest with a 600-page anthology relating to the events of September 11. Misha Klein and Adrian McIntyre, at the College of Letters & Science, are busy sorting through requests for *September 11: Contexts and Consequences*, the thick paperback reader they edited to provide critical thinking and informed debate about the new US war. The anthology offers a wide range of information and perspectives - maps, background information, poetry, opinion pieces, research articles by scholars, and an interview with Osama bin Laden - relating to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2001/12/04_antho.html

9. Calls for action

a) The online voice of the US-based magazine *Sojourners* urges President Bush to allow multinational peacekeepers to ensure safe delivery of humanitarian aid to the people of Afghanistan. Click on the following link <http://www.sojo.net/feedtheAfghanpeople/> to take action.

b) The Churches for Middle East Peace have issued a new petition <http://www.cmep.org/petition.html> on their website. The petition is “A Christian Call for Peace: We pray for peace in the Holy Land. We are Christians called to express our concerns for peace in Israel and Palestine.”

c) "Deny Them Their Victory," is NCCCUSA statement on the events of September 11. Over 3,300 religious leaders have signed it. <http://www.ncccusa.org/news/interfaithstatement.html>

Behind the news: Visions for Peace – Voices of Faith is a joint initiative of:

World Council of Churches (WCC) - a fellowship of 342 churches, in more than 100 countries in all continents from virtually all Christian traditions. The Roman Catholic Church is not a member church but works cooperatively with the WCC. The highest governing body is the Assembly, which meets approximately every seven years. The WCC was formally inaugurated in 1948 in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance - a global action network of 62 churches and church-related organizations who have pledged themselves to change unjust policies and practices related to global trade and HIV/AIDS, and to take up as a special concern work on peace and conflict resolution by forging strategic partnership. Alliance participants come from every corner of the globe and varied traditions within the ecumenical family – Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Anglican, as well as church-related organizations who themselves represent and serve many Christian faith traditions. Alliance participants are committed to speak out with one voice against injustice and structures which deprive human beings of dignity, and for alternative visions based on the Gospel.

Action by Churches Together (ACT) - an international alliance of churches and relief agencies assisting thousands of people recovering from emergencies in more than 50 countries worldwide.

This bulletin/website is intended to provide an ecumenical space for visions for peace and voices of faith; these materials do not necessarily reflect official policy of WCC, ACT, or EAA.

Please circulate the Bulletin to friends, colleagues and people who are looking for alternative perspectives on the current situation.

To subscribe to the bulletin, contact bulletins@wcc-coe.org

To share resources, reflections or information, contact bulletins@wcc-coe.org

Behind the news: Visions for peace – Voices of faith

Web: <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/behindthenews>