

Ways of seeing a troubled world

By Ernie Regehr

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In the past week while I was mulling over what I might say this morning, I was also involved in an e-mail discussion of a draft letter to the Prime Minister – a letter which would remind him again of the need for effective international action in response to the extraordinary plight of the people of Darfur in Sudan. It's not my intention now to focus on Darfur but I raise it to remind all of us that it is the kind of situation that, in varying degrees of intensity, is repeated with tragic regularity: a deeply troubled society in which social, political, and resource conflicts combine with racial and communal identity issues and are exacerbated by religious intolerance. To that are added the Kalashnikovs, M-16s, and other paraphernalia of warfare that transform social/political conflict into armed conflict. The results are measured in millions of displaced people, many tens of thousands of deaths, and many more lives threatened.

The letter last week was focused on Darfur. Similar letters are needed to draw attention to circumstances in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Northern Uganda, and other killing fields.

However, while I was thinking about these very hard realities, I was also reminded, through the scriptures that frame today's worship, of the extraordinary promises of the Gospel. The reading from Matthew 4:12-23 repeats Isaiah's promise that the people walking in darkness will see a great light – that for those millions in Darfur who now live in the shadow of death, a light has dawned.

We know this gap between reality and promise is not new. It was present in Isaiah's time, and it is thrust into our consciousness with renewed intensity when we watch the television images of the aftermath to the Asian tsunami. But the Psalms, too, written in times that were not strangers to strife and violence and natural calamities, are unequivocal in their promise of comfort and healing: in the day of trouble, says Psalm 27, the Lord will keep us safe. Psalm 91 promises that under his wings, we will find refuge.

The understandable question is “why?” – why this chasm between the promise of safety and the crushing vulnerabilities that rule the lives of so many? It's an eminently human question, of course, but perhaps the more humane question is “how?” – how do we do something about this promise gap?

The real point of the promise is that healing is possible. We don't have to wait for otherworldly guarantees that all tragedy and catastrophe will cease – we know already that suffering can be mitigated by an ongoing commitment to the kind of human solidarity and responsiveness that we have seen in the wake of the Asian tsunami, and in a renewed commitment to preventing the human-made catastrophes that are the source of so much human suffering.

Darfur, DRC, and Northern Uganda are but three of today's human-made catastrophes. At Project Ploughshares, we produce an annual armed conflicts report that tracks the world's current wars – and the current count is 32 wars on the territories of 26 countries. All but one are civil wars rooted in deeply embedded social, political, ethnic, and religious conflict and fought with the guns from which others profit.

There may indeed always be “wars and rumours of wars,” but the more one investigates particular wars, rather than the general phenomenon of war, the more one discovers how they could have been avoided. Human warfare may have the look of inevitability, but the good news is that no particular war is inevitable.

At the most basic level, to act on that good news we need to see the world in new ways. War is not part of nature, a part of the human condition; it is part of human construction. And as a church that acts in the world, we need to get on with the deconstruction of war. Remember what Paul said in the letter to the Romans (12:2, *New Jerusalem Bible*):

Do not model your behaviour on the contemporary world, but let the renewing of your minds transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and mature.

Part of the point here surely is that not only is it possible to see the world in new ways, from a different perspective, it's a duty. Paul is saying, don't model your behaviour and your minds on the conventional wisdom; rather, renew your minds so that your sight is transformed. Through transformed minds we discern the requirements for peace, i.e., the will of God, and through transformed minds we will learn to deconstruct the deadly convention of ongoing war.

This verse from Romans has got to be one of the great pro-public education texts of the Bible. The discernment of God's will is not linked here to piety or spirituality or belief systems – but to thinking and analysis and understanding, to mind renewal. If we want to see things to which the world is blind, we've got to work at transforming our minds so that we become receptive to new realities.

It's like those little trick pictures that as kids we all examined at one time or another. At first glance, it's an ordinary scene, a neat little house, with some trees and fluffy clouds; but closer inspection shows other images: clouds turn out to be sheep; hidden in the leaves of a tree are a

wolf's jaw or a person's gnarled hand. The point usually is to see if you can find all the hidden figures. And a strange thing happens as you look at the picture. Once your mind has adjusted to looking at the picture in this new way, the previously hidden images become obvious and start jumping out at you. You begin seeing things that apparently weren't there when your mind was in the old mode, when you assumed it was just an ordinary picture to be taken as presented.

I've always taken great heart from this phenomenon. It tells us that we don't have to be bound by conventional wisdom. We *can* see new things, come to new understanding, *if* we make some adjustments in the way we look at things – *if* we alter our mindset.

Paul's counsel, of course, is not only personal. It defines the social-political responsibility of the church to help transform the public mind, to help us as a society discern what is good and acceptable and mature in a world strongly influenced by other forces. The mind-altering power of the mass media is obvious. On some memorable occasions the media mobilize compassion, but often they traffic in stereotypes and worse: War in Africa is endemic. War in Iraq was necessary –whether to protect us from weapons of mass destruction, to depose a dictator, or to spread freedom. The village in Vietnam of the 1960s and the Falluja of 2004 had to be destroyed to save them from the enemy insurgents. North America faces a vulnerability that can only be fixed by re-making it into a fortress covered by a protective ballistic missile defence shield and by curtailing the liberties of those defined, even by complexion and religion, as suspect.

But what of the hidden images, the ones not reported? Where in these conventional pictures is the wolf's jaw? Can we see in the picture of war in Africa the hidden hand of a market that undervalues African labour and drains off its resources? Can we see in the 36 wars in 28 countries the global trade in arms that enriches the few and enslaves the others? Can we see in the images of fortress North America the hubris of technology and the prejudice of triumphalism? Or can we find the images that confirm human interdependence as a source of durable safety, rather than evidence of threat?

We don't discover new images without deliberate effort, attention, and intention. In fact, the churches in Canada have understood this very well, which is why some 30 years ago they set about assembling a group of about a dozen interchurch coalitions with the specific mandate to do research, to provide information, and to undertake public education and public advocacy on a whole range of social, economic, and political issues facing Canadian society. Those coalitions have now been consolidated into two – Kairos and Project Ploughshares. The point of equipping coalitions with research, publication, and travel budgets is to ensure that we in the ecumenical community become more than uncritical consumers of the conventional pictures that are put in front of us.

The transformation of the public mind through information and careful analysis is essential to liberating us as Canadians from what can be a debilitating social isolation. In a global context, we are a narrow, provincial economic sect, isolated in an affluence that insulates us from direct

encounters with much of the hurting world and that encourages us to see things in particular and distorted ways.

One result of the churches' collective effort to address social, political, and economic issues from a human-centred compassion has been some significant changes in the way that they understand security. These changes came through with unusual clarity in response to both wars on Iraq, as well as the Kosovo and Afghanistan conflicts. In the course of responding to these crises, Christian traditions as diverse as the mainstream Protestants in the Canadian Council of Churches, the Roman Catholics, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, and the Mennonites, looking deep within their own respective teachings and understandings, all came to the same urgent conclusion that these wars could *not* be morally justified. That the pacifist traditions came to that conclusion is hardly a surprise. But many of the others, relying on – not rejecting – the insights of the just war tradition, also concluded that the use of massive military force would not serve human well-being and safety.

I think a key to reaching that conclusion is to be found in the churches' earlier involvement in the anti-nuclear movement of the 1980s. During that time the just war tradition turned out to be a constructive guide, not to the justification of war, but to understanding limits on the just resort to force. And in the nuclear debate, the conclusion widely arrived at by mainstream Christians was that nuclear weapons, at a minimum, violate the requirements for proportion and for avoidance of attacks on non-combatants. Canadian church leaders communicated this position directly to the Prime Minister on more than one occasion, saying that under no circumstances could God's will, that is, justice, be served by the use of, or threat to use, nuclear weapons. These events were important in removing moral legitimacy from weapons of mass destruction – biological and chemical weapons, as well as nuclear.

Following on that debate, Christians from the same traditions have taken another look at conventional war. Given the level of destructiveness of modern conventional warfare (for example, the fact that modern war inevitably kills many more civilians than combatants), many have concluded that the resort to any kind of war is an act of mass destruction and must be regarded as outside the bounds of the justified use of force. This is not an argument for pacifism. There remains within this understanding the possibility of the just use of military force in policing and patrolling types of operations as part of the task of protecting the vulnerable and, indeed, preventing war. In other words, in the churches' collective understanding the legitimate use of military force internationally is increasingly limited to the kinds of roles we domestically assign to police forces.

The draft letter on Darfur I mentioned in my opening included the possibility of calling on the United Nations to arrange for additional military forces to assist the Africa Union forces, which are far too small and ill-equipped to deal with the rebel and militia forces attacking vulnerable civilians. In this situation we desperately require transformed minds to understand how to serve the people of Darfur. Our minds are informed by experiences of the futility of military efforts to

sow stability and tranquility in places like Iraq and Kosovo. But we have also known for too long that the people of Darfur have faced arbitrary killings, rape, and forced displacement, and that they cannot go to their phones to call 911 and get the help of police. Abandoned by their own government, the wings under which they can find safety must be spread by someone else.

Which picture reflects reality? What do these pictures tell us about what, in the words of Paul, is good, acceptable and mature? The not very comforting reality is that the answers must be continuously and repeatedly discerned – through the deliberate, informed, and empathetic renewal of the collective mind of the church. It is our ongoing task, and I wish for all of you God's never failing gift of grace in your mind-renewing, and ultimately world-renewing, work.