

OLAV FYKSE TVEIT

The Church must have a role in peacebuilding

Reverend Olav Fykse Tveit is the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC). He works to help churches in conflict-affected areas to rebuild peace. For Reverend Tveit, peacebuilding is an inherent part of his faith.

The World Council of Churches was established to deliberate on, and work for the unity of humanity through different churches in the world. Reverend Olav Fykse Tveit works as General Secretary of the WCC with the conviction that “The Church must have a role in peacebuilding”. It is especially active in conflict-affected areas where it aids local churches to find ways to help the population.

When he was still a young man, Olav Fykse Tveit experienced a very peculiar event. He was travelling around Europe alone by train and planning to stop in Bologna for the night, when a stranger advised him not to stop there. Not really knowing the reason for the advice, Olav Fykse Tveit decided to follow it and went to Switzerland instead. The next day in the newspaper he read about a bombing at Bologna railway station that had happened the night before.

This amazing event affected Olav Fykse Tveit very deeply. One question kept going through his mind: “Why did I survive and not others?” Unable to answer this question, he finally decided to do something about it, “One of my reactions was - okay, I have to do something with my life to show thanks for this opportunity, so how could I contribute to peace, and end violence?”



Religion as a tool for peacebuilding

While Olav Fykse Tveit currently works for the WCC, he is also a pastor for the Lutheran church of Norway. To him, working to build peace in the world is an inherent part of his Christian faith and his role as a pastor. The Church has an important role to play in peacebuilding through the message of peace among humanity, “The Church should be a promoter of peaceful solutions to any conflict”. There are many examples of the different forms of work the WCC can do in the field. For example, in South Sudan, the WCC works with the National Council of Churches and supports its role as a voice for the people of South Sudan as a leader of peace in a nation ridden by conflicts and tragedies. It is also very active in Israel and Palestine, where the Reverend often visits to consult with partners to discuss what can be done to advocate for peace. He also visits people who live in these countries and talks to them about their daily lives.

The WCC also sends people as part of an accompaniment program to observe and write reports, which are then shared with the UN. They are also involved in partnering with leaders of other religions. For example, in Nigeria the WCC has opened a Centre for Peace and Reconciliation with Muslim partners. Anyone who is a victim of violence can come to the Centre and share their experience as a human being, irrespective of their faith.

One of his most memorable experiences when the church played a role in peacebuilding was in Colombia, after the peace treaty was signed. He went there to be part of the implementation of the treaty, and was fortunate enough to have a meeting with the President of Colombia. The President underlined the important role the Church played in the peace process, saying that they had been very important actors in ending a conflict that had lasted for more than thirty years. Talking to the president and having his personal opinion on the matter was a very rewarding experience for the Reverend, and convinced him even more that the Church can help build peace.

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Religion as a motivation for violence

The Reverend however is also very aware of the danger that religion can represent if it is not used wisely. He realizes that presently religion has become the centre of attention in a very negative way, as a potential source for violence and conflict. That is why, according to Olav Fykse Tveit, it is important to be wary about the negative connotations religion can have. It is essential to promote dialogue with leaders of other religions, and to be aware of the risk in defining the other as an enemy. It seems that the solution is to see other people of faith as just that, other people with faith, with whom we can discuss and work. That is why Olav Fykse Tveit insists on the importance of the work of some churches, for example in Germany, who are actively trying to establish good relationships with the Muslim community.

Olav Fykse Tveit is also convinced that young people are an important public to reach, as they are the future of our society. He is constantly inspired by them because they are honest and very clear about the desire for something other than conflict. They give the Reverend hope that relationships can change, and that we can make a difference in the world. “The building of relationships is based on our humanity; our understanding of the human condition has a huge potential”.

Marie Reynard

