



Final Communiqué from International Workshop “Dealing with the Past and Reconciliation – Learning in the Light of the Liberian Experience” (17th-21st April 2023)

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons and daughters of God” [Mt 5:9]

We have come together in Liberia, forty-four participants from thirteen different countries, for a week-long workshop with the theme “Dealing with the Past and Reconciliation – Learning in the Light of the Liberian Experience”. The organisers – the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Liberia (CABICOL), the Justice and Peace Commission of the Bishops’ Conference of Germany and AGIAMONDO – have brought peace practitioners from around the world to stand in solidarity with the people of Liberia in the search for lasting peace, and to learn lessons from their experience to strengthen the work of peace and reconciliation in our different contexts. This work would not have been possible without the collaboration and support of our partners: the Kofi Annan Institute for Conflict Transformation (KAICT) and Foundation of International Dignity (FIND).

The violence of recent decades has left deep wounds in Liberian society. This was evident in the testimonies from the victims and survivors who graciously accepted to share their stories of loss and suffering with us. The need for spiritual, emotional and psychosocial healing was evident. There is a legacy of individual and collective trauma that requires careful and consistent attention and support to allow healing to happen and lay the foundations for lasting peace. There are lessons to be learned from this experience about the particular vulnerability of women and children to serious human rights violations in contexts of violent conflict, and their specific needs in the healing process. **We encourage the State, faith-based and civic leaders to acknowledge a collective responsibility to provide safe and meaningful opportunities for victims and survivors to tell their stories, to support each other and to advocate for their needs regarding the healing process.**

Many of the victims and survivors we met felt forgotten, abandoned, isolated and even fearful. There is a risk in processes of peace and reconciliation that victims and survivors can be marginalised and silenced. This is compounded where there is a lack of public acknowledgement of the suffering that has occurred and the lives that have been lost. One concrete contribution we can make is to honour the memory of all those who lost their lives in the places where acts of violence occurred. In this way we bear witness to the dignity and worth of every human person. **We appeal for a collaborative approach to this work of acknowledgement and memorialisation, led by the Liberian Government, with the support of local leaders, including faith-based and civic leaders. By uniting in our recognition of the unacceptable human cost of violence we can reduce the risk of its reoccurrence.**

We listened to the experiences of those who became involved in acts of violence, from different warring factions. Their stories convey difficult but important messages about the complexity of violent conflict, where some who were victims of acts of violence continued that destructive cycle by inflicting violence on others. It is important to create space to

explore and understand these realities, while giving due priority to the suffering of victims and survivors and respecting the memory of those who have lost their lives. When groups that were fighting each other in civil war come together as brothers and sisters to state clearly that the only way forward is a peaceful future for all Liberians this is a significant witness. They bring an important perspective on the cost of war. Those who have been responsible for acts of violence are also in need of healing. We pray that they can come to a conversion of heart and truly repent of that violence, making a meaningful contribution to processes of truth-recovery and reconciliation.

We heard that in Liberia, as in other parts of the world, the process of peace and reconciliation remains incomplete. The Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) process has not fully realised its aims. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process has left many unanswered questions about justice and accountability. **This points to a need for renewed commitment to take forward the unfinished work of peace, reconciliation and social justice, supported by structures and processes responsive to the concrete and diverse realities of different local contexts, with transparency around intended outcomes and objectives.**

We pay tribute to the courage of those who worked for peace at the height of war, at great personal risk and cost. Their leadership brought light to very dark places. They too have experienced trauma and loss and need to be supported to find healing. We hope that political leaders will be open to learning from their experience and provide them with the space needed to carry out this work. Many of these people played critical roles in holding communities together at times of fear and threat. They have an important contribution still to make, as part of wider civic and political partnerships, in overcoming the fragmentation of society that is left in the wake of violence. **In Liberia, as in other parts of the world, there is a responsibility on Government, and the wider international community, to ensure protection for the work of human rights defenders.**

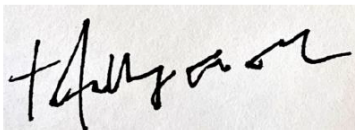
In times of conflict the Church in Liberia has shared in the wounds of a suffering society and today it continues to share in the joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of that society as it searches for lasting peace, especially the poor and most vulnerable [Cf Gaudium et Spes, 1]. Throughout the conflict and beyond, the Church, together with other faith communities, has been regarded as an honest broker, trusted to convene sensitive and significant dialogue, and to act in accordance with the common good. Today that work of dialogue remains an urgent priority and the Church is ready to act as a field hospital, tending to the humanitarian needs of a struggling society, mourning with those who grieve and holding before us the Christian call to be instruments of God's peace.

"Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth" (Psalm 124: 8).

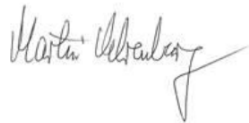
At the conclusion of our workshop we pay tribute to the strength and resilience of the Liberian people. We express our gratitude for the generosity of our hosts and guests. It is our hope that our experiences here will strengthen the work of peace not only in Liberia, but in all our different contexts.

The process of reconciliation here is being shaped and led by the people of Liberia, informed by their experiences and responding to their needs. At the same time, there is an important role for the international community to renew efforts to protect peace and promote reconciliation, with attention to the economic and social development needs that are part of the legacy of war. There is a need for particular investment in the youth of Liberia as the leaders of the future, taking account of the many ways in which they continue to be impacted by the consequences of war in this post-conflict period.

We pray for lasting peace, reconciliation and healing in this land. When the challenges before us appear overwhelming, we remember that with God's grace all things are possible. We accept our responsibility to be agents of God's peace, here and in all places scarred by the violence of war. May we carry the hope engendered by these encounters into the different contexts in which we work.



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Notes

1. Workshop participants came from the following countries: Liberia, Austria, Germany, Ghana, Ireland, South Sudan, Timor Leste, Cameroon, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Uganda.
2. AGIAMONDO was founded in 1959 by Catholic organisations with the aim of creating a personnel service for German Catholics in the field of international cooperation. On the basis of the "German Development Workers Act (EhfG)", AGIAMONDO recruits qualified co-workers for a professional solidarity service with church and civil society organisations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe. In Liberia, we are implementing with our Liberian partners a Civil Peace Service Programme, which is financed by the German government. In the Civil Peace Service, AGIAMONDO works together with national partner organisations to develop sustainable programmes for peace and human rights work.