

Introduction

I am very honored to be called to serve as president of IFOR. This has not at all been part of my plans or expectations. I want to thank you for entrusting to me the task of moderating the ICOM and IFOR. Being asked and given the opportunity to work with you all in the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., of many others and with the creative and courageous BGAs all over the world fills me with deep gratitude and joy.

If we are here together it is because we have come to believe in and witness to nonviolence. At this particular moment I feel the need to say a few things, in a way as if to put out some markers. I want to say a few words about three things:

About Love, Nonviolence & Peace, Violence and Conflict

- Nonviolence is a force which is within love. Nonviolence grows out of love. Love includes nonviolence. Whoever does violence to someone he or she loves, betrays the love at that moment. Violence, very much like fear, is a reality outside of love. And just as love casts out fear, love casts out violence. Love is not primarily a sentimental thing, it is a matter of acknowledgement, respect and tenderness. Love is the core value of any religion and of any religious aspiration. Where it is not, religion becomes quickly instrumentalized and a justification of violence.
- The opposite of violence is not peace, but tenderness. Nor is conflict the opposite of peace, but peace is the fruit of nonviolence and tenderness.
- The confusion of conflict and violence is a most unhelpful reality you find in media, religious circles, and also in the peace movement. The general assumption is that violence is a continuation of conflict. Violence may well emerge out of conflict. But very often violence has roots or factors elsewhere: in greed, in the search for control or profit, entertainment and fun, or in boredom and stupidity. Violence is rather the opposite of conflict, which is a natural and in its essence a neutral thing, than its automatic continuation.
- While the pacifist movement is very old, violence as an individual and collective disorder/disease is being researched only since my generation's time. Research in the humanities increasingly describes violence in terms of dysfunction of the collective fabric. On the other hand, violence prevention was declared a public health priority by the World Health Organization (Resolution WHA49.25). It is a new day when it comes to violence and responses to it. That's good news, in spite of the general sense that violence is on the increase. Our society, ourselves included, still operates on some old and outdated assumptions on the meaning and mechanisms of violence. Violence prevents conflict from being dealt with and for being constructive. Which is why we must not only seek justice and peace through nonviolence, but we must prevent and reduce violence in very practical manners.
- Finally, pacifism has a great history and it is not in vain that kings, rulers, governments and corporations are scared of it. However, most of us these days they have little reason to be afraid, because the nonviolence movement has become largely intangible. It's there but it's dispersed and scattered and it refuses to be unified and mobilized. The world does remember Gandhi, King, and others, but it does not remember the pertinence and real challenge of their conviction and practice. Yet I believe that the time has come for nonviolence to make its way, not because we can, but because it is the future and people grow closer to recognizing that. Never before in human history has violence been so strongly denounced and war so utterly discredited as in our time. Never before in the world's history have victims been given more voice than in our day. Let us use this decisive, dangerous but incredibly hopeful time to promote nonviolence.

About IFOR

IFOR a fellowship rooted in spirituality and as its members we believe in and work to exercise the power of active nonviolence. In all that, we still are who we are as human beings: limited, sometimes fearful and often confused people who long to be loved.

Let's make no mistake: we don't own nonviolence and peace and even less do we own love - rather, love, peace and nonviolence got a hold of us, they want us to belong to them. Just as some Christians tend to feel they own the truth, or Jesus, or the Bible, so it is a danger for pacifists to pretend they have a monopoly on nonviolence and consider outsiders to the movement to be lost cases and useless. I believe humility is a fit for pacifists and that there is a lot of nonviolent and loving acts out there among the non-pacifists. Our task is to discover and unveil the light in other people, be they who they may.

That's why I am less tolerant with ourselves when it comes to how we play our institutional or corporate or associative games. Precisely because we claim to adhere to nonviolence we need to expect and exercise total respect, transparency and fairness in how we operate and work together. And we need to make room for tensions and conflict and take them seriously, but not too seriously. Often though we could prevent conflict and embarrassment by being attentive, sensitive and listening.

IFOR has a great legacy, it claims great personalities as its members and models, and its message and vision is as grand, prophetic, daring and risky as always. Because of that, IFOR and what it stands for deserves better visibility and more profile in our societies.

This council just welcomed several new members. And I was impressed by the fact that they are highly profiled, highly visible, and highly motivated people. They are examples for us. There is hope for IFOR! I was also most impressed with the WPP - I feel that right now, perhaps IFOR rides on the wings of WPP rather than the other way around. And yes, we do need to sync management systems and clarify the relationship.

New membership clearly indicates a shift of IFOR active membership from the Global North to the Global South. Sweden and the US are historically among the largest branches. But we have heard the numbers of people involved in the projects of our new branches in Africa and Asia. We are a global fellowship, but we are a euro-centered organization. - Office, officers, institutional approaches. This cannot be changed overnight. Most institutions have failed to change. Those who have succeeded have taken a long time. It takes patience. But this Council has just seen what may be no less than a landslide shift of IFOR's grassroots and programmatic reality to the South.

We talked at length about the fellowship-network-NGO nature of IFOR. To be sure, IFOR is a global body and in many ways bears the marks of an international organization. As it is, international organizations lack efficiency and suffer from institutional dysfunctions. Being a pacifist group doesn't exempt us from such ills.

I sense a need for the collective culture of IFOR to be carefully considered. That's primarily because of the shift to the South, but it is also because of what I think I observe to be something of a habit within IFOR. Whenever a problem or gap occurs, the tendency is to quickly create some new policy or institutional extension, often without thinking very much about the overall complexities and the longer term issues involved. When we're together for an intensive time, sealed off from our daily realities, it is very easy to get lost in wishful thinking and unrealistic claims.

The three following priorities I think will determine the work of ICOM over the coming months:

- Assess and clarify the organizational, financial, operational and managerial situation. This includes staffing the int'l secretariat, adjusting the office setup, clarify the relationship between Int'l secretariat and WPP and look at consolidating and increasing the income for IFOR.
- Rebuilding steady and ties with the branches/BGAs, by establishing and consolidate a flow of communication and exchange.
- Increasing the profile and visibility of IFOR in light of the Centennial. This will be dealt with in the context of the planning for the Centennial in 2014, in conjunction with the next Council.

About myself

I grew up on a farm, as part of a rural community where simplicity and honesty were evident and expected. I am a Christian, Mennonite, with an ecumenical heart and a passion for inter-cultural and inter-religious encounter, learning and cooperation.

I came to this Council to participate as Swiss representative and I actually was reluctant to get involved in anything beyond that. I work for the Swiss branches at 60% and on the side I manage a fair trade shop and am Webmaster for Mennonite World Conference. For over 30 years I have been involved professionally and personally in community building, organizational development and chaos, relief, peacemaking and pastoral work, all on an international level. During 20 years I travelled extensively and have attended more meetings than I can possibly remember. I have met extraordinary people who were into extraordinary things, sometimes doing them, and sometimes suffering them.

About two months ago my father died. He was a gentle man and a courageous one. He was involved in land issues, and matters of succession. I often admired his courage to go straight to people when he felt something was wrong. But then he let go of that and people knew they were respected and cared about. That build respect and trust for him in the larger community. On his last day, he told his grand-children about his gratitude to have been loved. And he said: "Now I'm going to go into the kingdom of love. - Take good care of love". That sentence will ring in the ears of our family and community for a long time to come. And I hope I will keep remembering it as I work within the fellowship of IFOR.