

WCC Living Letters

Team Visit to the United States

September 14th-24th, 2007

Faces of peacemaking on our journey together towards the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation

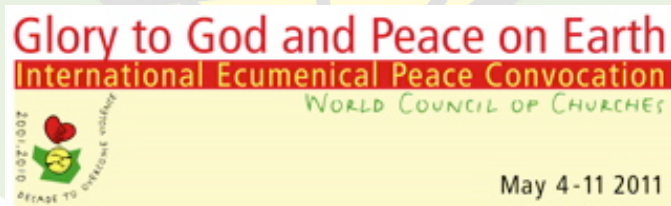


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INTRODUCTION

by Hansuli Gerber

The Living Letters team visit to the US, as part of the Decade to Overcome Violence and its journey leading up to the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation (IEPC) (www.overcomingviolence.org/iepc), found peace and non-violence the main foci of the visit. This was the second such visit in 2007, after a visit by another team to Sri Lanka. While the opportunities for learning were many fold, exciting and challenging, the hosts of the visit were thrilled to have guests from all over the world - guests interested in what is happening on the ground in regard to violence and peace, and what is being done to promote just peace and non-violence. Meanwhile, the participants found the experience highly inspiring, motivating, and one which would leave lasting, life changing impressions. Some of these impressions are reflected in Marcelo Schneider's blog (www.overcomingviolence.org). Yet others are conveyed through the WCC press releases found in Annex II and, in due course, video clips will be also be made available.

When the WCC General Assembly in Porto Alegre encouraged such visits as part of the DOV, it did so with the conviction that in this way peace, non-violence, justice and compassion could be given faces and stories. In the World Council of Churches we talk a lot about peace and justice and we produce study and consultation papers. However, peace and justice are tangible, concrete and they are being lived out by people with names and faces, in communities with struggles, joys and suffering.

Violence, peace and justice are immensely vast and complex issues. What emerged towards the end of the visit to the US were a number of thematic threads, sometimes reshaped through repeated occurrence as we traveled, listened, and jointly reflected on what it all meant. So the team decided that each of the participants would write an essay around one of the thematic threads on which we had already agreed. These are not reports in the strict sense of the term, nor are they conclusions. These are reflections based on what the Living Letters team or individual members of it saw, heard, witnessed, discussed or "pondered in their heart". They are markers on the way to the Peace Convocation and contributions to the deliberations on an ecumenical declaration on just peace. The contributors to this report will unanimously affirm the uniqueness and extraordinary character of this experience.

Our gratitude goes to the members of the Living Letters team, all those who helped to organise the visit, and the hosts who welcomed us and provided for the team with a great deal of hospitality and generosity. May this visit bear the fruit of peace and justice, to the Glory of God.



On Faithful Commitment

by Deborah DeWinter

“When the people lead, the leaders will follow” was a consistent theme our delegation experienced as we encountered people of faith along our way, making a difference in their communities by working for peace and reconciliation.

Upon later reflection, we were also struck by another common thread weaving its way through the tapestry of the whole of our experience of the Living Letters delegation – the thread which we have termed: faithful commitment.

Gathering first for orientation at St. Hilda’s House (www.chssisters.org/chs_003.htm), the delegation began non-traditionally in that the rules of this guest house, operated as a ministry of hospitality by an Episcopal religious order for women in the heart of Upper Manhattan, encourage silence and meditation, rather than conversation and discussion. And so at this critical beginning in which bonds were forged and group identity established, we found ourselves starting our journey together in meditative silence rather than with words. Somehow the faithful commitment of the sisters of The Community of the Holy Spirit to encourage time for silence and meditation in our busy lives provided the members of our group arriving from South and North, East and West – from various time zones and agendas heavy with responsibilities – to pause and breathe and focus long enough for the Spirit to work a transformation in our hearts. While we would not have naturally chosen this way to begin, the reality is that the sisters’ faithful commitment to creating the holy space for the Spirit to work did allow us to put aside our individual priorities and begin the journey of listening to the other and to those we encountered along our way with open hearts – a key mandate in all Living Letters journeys.

We were deeply impressed by the faithful commitment of Rev. Khader El-Yateem and the people of **Salam Arabic Lutheran Church** (www.arabicbible.com/salam/) in Brooklyn, New York whose decision to make their church home a place of welcome and a safe space for people of different faiths to find common ground, has enabled a whole community to live in peace against all odds. Because of this faithful commitment to the Gospel’s call to love one another, Muslim, Christian and Jewish neighbours had already come to know and trust each other before the crisis of 9/11 threatened to irreparably tear the fabric of interfaith tolerance in this Brooklyn neighbourhood. On that terrible day - because of the relationships already established over time between religious and civic leaders through meetings hosted by Salam Arabic Lutheran Church - the church became a literal sanctuary for a community fearing for its well-being and braced for retaliatory violence. On the day that the Living Letters delegation visited Salam Arabic Lutheran Church, it was very evident that Muslim and Christian leaders alike, gathered in that place to greet us were mutually committed to overcoming violence and setting an example of respect and peaceful coexistence.

From the first moments of our encounter with the ushers and deacons preparing for Worship at the **Abyssinian Baptist Church** (www.abyssinian.org) in Harlem and throughout every element of the liturgy of word and sacrament that followed, it was very evident that this was

a vital community of Christians clear in their mission and faithfully committed to extending a warm welcome in the name of Christ Jesus to friend and stranger alike. Every member of this congregation we met took pride in their calling and was faithful in living out their responsibilities – whether as greeters, ushers, deacons, choir members, elders, liturgists, preacher or congregants. We felt the power of that faithful commitment and its impact for good in that Harlem neighbourhood. We left in the power of that faithful commitment, inspired in our faith, and empowered anew for our mission as Living Letters by their example and by their prayers for us.

In the beauty of a gorgeous fall day on the banks of the Hudson River in Nyack, New York, we were impressed by the faithful commitment of ordinary people from faith-based and secular elements of society working together for peace and reconciliation comprising the **Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR)**. We were moved by the extraordinary witness of those individuals who were the recipients of the FOR Peace Prizes, working faithfully as peacemakers and bridge-builders in their respective communities and in some cases, extending their impact across the globe. The atmosphere of FOR's annual peace conference was rather like a family reunion – people picnicking on the lawn, musicians entertaining outdoors, animated conversations taking place in various table groups, children running around having a good time together. As the oldest and largest interfaith peace and justice organization in the United States, FOR has been faithfully committed to doing just that: nurturing reunion and reconciliation within the fragile and fragmented human family since 1915.

In Washington, DC, we were struck by the faithful commitment of the Historic Peace Churches through the example provided by the **Church of the Brethren's Washington/Witness office** in offering alternatives to armed violence in resolving conflict. In a moving tour of Washington's war monuments, perspectives from this peace church provided insights on the human cost of war and on alternative models for national service – a commitment which has enabled conscientious objectors to fulfil obligations for service to their country while honouring their pacifist convictions. We were also deeply impressed by the important witness of the historic peace churches in the United States, particularly given the alignment of some churches on the right with the current Administration's pre-emptive war policies.

The faithful commitment of gun control lobbyists in Washington including the **Million Mom March** (Washington, DC Chapter) and the **Arms Sales Transfer Group** to make their voices heard above the din of the powerful NRA lobby also impressed us. By keeping the alarming statistics of those who have suffered deaths by hand guns in the United States in the public eye, and by documenting the role the United States has played in selling arms to those responsible in other parts of the world for perpetrating violence, groups such as these provide invaluable support to those in the churches and in the government who daily advocate for tighter controls – even if they feel like David facing Goliath, day in and day out.

In a discussion of the Iraq War, the faithful commitment of the leadership of the **National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA** was seen to be a key influence in rallying the churches and other faith communities in first opposing the war in Iraq, and then in

speaking out against the war – despite the fact that originally nearly fifty percent of those in the pews of the NCCCUSA’s member churches supported the current Administration in invading and occupying Iraq. Ultimately, the NCCCUSA’s faithful commitment to advocacy and education and in helping bear witness to the position of the churches in the Middle East in opposing the war has helped to shift the balance so that the majority of those in the pews and in society now oppose the Administrations’ policies on Iraq.

We were moved by the stories told of the impact of the internally displaced and alarming flow of refugees out of Iraq as shared by Dr. Elizabeth Ferris, Senior Fellow at **The Brookings Institute**, a prestigious Washington, DC “think tank.” With so many leaving, she explained, societal infrastructures are near collapse. Beth Ferris’ faithful commitment over the course of a lifetime in giving voice to the uprooted and speaking truth to power on their behalf continues to make a difference in both national and international seats of power.

In Akron, Pennsylvania we met with leaders of the **Mennonite Central Committee (MCC)** and received warm overnight hospitality at their “Welcoming Place.” In the course of this visit, we were once again moved by the humble and quietly effective witness of another Historic Peace Church. The focused work on peace and reconciliation in the United States and throughout the world via such well-respected programs as the Mennonite Volunteer Service is a testament to the faithful commitment of a humble people of faith who choose to live simply in an overly complex and materialistic society. By conscientiously avoiding the materialism of the broader society and living in close community, the Mennonites have been able to focus far more energy on service to others and in seeking peace and reconciliation wherever there is the potential or the reality of violence and suffering.

After a tour of the **MCC’s Material Resource Center**, we spoke together about how touched we had been by the degree upon which this volunteer-powered service center is fuelled by the talents and faithful commitment of older volunteers. Whereas in many segments of US society elders are considerably marginalized and often even regarded as a drain upon limited resources – within the Mennonite community they are regarded as valued co-workers who continue to be counted upon to keep donations coming in and moving out to parts of the world where they are sorely needed.

Because the Mennonites have lived their convictions with such faithful commitment to their principles, they have also, over the years, won the respect and trust of their Amish neighbours. This level of trust led to a request by the Amish for the Mennonites to serve as a liaison to the wider world at the time of the Nichol Mines school tragedy a year ago when five young Amish schoolgirls were killed by a disturbed gunman. And this bond of trust also enabled us to meet with the Amish deacon of the Nichol Mines community with the help of a Mennonite liaison.

One of the key stops along our way as a Living Letters delegation was to visit the **Nickel Mines Amish community** in order to express how deeply their witness of forgiveness and reconciliation with the family of the gunman had impacted people all around the world. Here, as in no other place, the example of faithful commitment took on a power that has already reverberated around the globe when, within days of the shooting and deaths of their children, members of the Amish community called upon the widow and children of the

killer, offering forgiveness and financial assistance to the family. In the peace of an Amish farmhouse and meeting over a bountiful table of home-cooked food prepared by an Amish family living near Paradise, Pennsylvania, we listened to the profound simplicity in which this Amish community lived out their faithful commitment to following Jesus Christ in forgiving their neighbours and being reconciled with them.

For 51 years The Rev. Dr. William J. Shaw, current President of the National Baptist Convention USA, has been serving as Pastor of the **White Rock Baptist Church** in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania which has the highest homicide rate of any city in the United States. Because of Dr. Shaw's faithful commitment of over half a century of ministry and outreach in this particular inner city neighbourhood and in the greater Philadelphia environs, his influence has had a pivotal effect in rallying the faith community and civic leaders around issues of urban violence. Because of his reputation of integrity and dedication to Christ's ministry of reconciliation, Dr. Shaw was able to bring together faith leaders from many denominations in Philadelphia to join members of our Living Letters delegation and members of the United States Decade to Overcome Violence Committee of the US Conference for the World Council of Churches for a prayer breakfast featuring an address by the Mayor of Philadelphia, John Street. In speaking of efforts to overcome violence in the city, Mayor Street called for "...a spiritual transplant...the transformation of hearts and minds...which requires the full participation of churches." In reflecting on the power of this occasion and the ability to generate considerable media attention on the delegation's visit, we noted the significance one individual can have by being faithfully committed to a particular community over the course of years, building bridges of understanding along the way, and thereby having established relationships upon which issues as sensitive as violence might be jointly addressed in times of crisis.

During the **International Day of Peace** ceremonies on 21 September instituted by the **United Nations** which the World Council of Churches in 2004 called the churches to also observe as the **International Day of Prayer for Peace**, our delegation was struck by the witness of two public advocates who have made it their life's work to be faithfully committed to nurturing peace and understanding among peoples, and peace and mutual respect between human beings and the whole created universe - namely Holocaust survivor and human rights advocate Elie Wiesel and environmentalist Jane Goodall.

Across the street from the UN, we joined an ecumenical prayer service co-facilitated by the **WCC's United Nations Liaison Office** staff with ecumenical partners in the Tillman Chapel of the Church Center for the United Nations. Once more, we reflected on the fruit of the faithful commitment of so many ordinary women of the United Methodist church so many years ago who contributed to bake sales, rummage sales, quilt-making and all kinds of volunteer activities to raise funds that ultimately enabled the **Women's Division of the United Methodist Church** to purchase two buildings that are essential to the vital advocacy work of the churches on Capitol Hill and at the United Nations – and have been over the course of the past half-century.

The last stop along the Living Letters journey was a visit to **New Orleans** facilitated by the North American President for the World Council of Churches and Moderator of the United States Conference for the WCC, The Rev. Dr. Bernice Powell Jackson. In other areas of this

report, we have reflected on the deep emotional and spiritual impact of what we experienced in seeing the devastation that remains in this community two years after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, as well as the faithful commitment and witness of the churches and people of faith who have endured against all odds in the aftermath of the Hurricane.

But one other dimension should be lifted up in relation to our Living Letters visit to New Orleans, and that is the example of the faithful commitment to grassroots servanthood of the Rev. Dr. Bernice Powell Jackson. Having made the decision not to stand for a third term as Minister for Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ just before Hurricane Katrina struck, and being available for any call in the United States or international arena, Rev. Dr. Powell Jackson opted to respond to the need of **Beecher Memorial United Church of Christ** in the devastated 7th Ward of New Orleans, which had a pastoral vacancy at the time of the hurricane. Commuting from her home in Florida every two weeks to pastor Beecher Memorial while simultaneously maintaining a heavy schedule of voluntary responsibilities for the World Council of Churches and US Conference for the WCC, Pastor Powell Jackson has shepherded the Beecher community as they have striven to reclaim their lives, homes, schools, jobs, community and church. She has been with the faithful people of God at Beecher Memorial as they gutted their church building and worked through the difficult process of decontamination, chose to move back “home” to worship in the bones of the gutted fellowship hall (after sharing space at another church) and as they have advocated with civic authorities for the right to bring in qualified volunteer electricians and plumbers and builders to restore their church and carry on with the business of ministry in their immediate, suffering neighbourhood. Rev. Dr. Powell Jackson’s faithful commitment to grassroots ministry informs the quality, integrity and depth of her leadership and witness in the local, national and international ecumenical faith communities – a sacrifice of faith that has made a deep impact on members of the Living Letters delegation.



On People vs Power by Eddie Makue

If the people lead, leaders will follow.

The WCC DOV Living Letters delegation to the United States visited the Peace Festival of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) in Nyack (NY) (www.forpeace.net). In the parking area was a vehicle bumper sticker with the words “If the people lead leaders will follow”. The truth of this statement can be traced back in the history of humanity. Many appropriate examples can be found in the Bible.

Let’s first revisit Exodus 18 where Moses sat alone to serve as judge of the people. Moses is advised to choose/appoint from amongst the people able men (and women) to assist him in proclaiming justice. We may draw further insights from 1 Samuel 8 where the Israelites wish to have a King. Although the leader, Samuel, may have been displeased with the request from the people, he heeded their request.

There are several other instances in the Old Testament where the broad significance of people’s participation in leadership is illuminated. One significant case in the New Testament (the new covenant) involves Jesus, our Saviour. It is the case where a woman accused of adultery is brought before Jesus for judgment (John 8). It is important to note that it was the scribes and Pharisees who brought this woman before Jesus. These people coerced Jesus to take action.

In the instances above there are differences in the resultant effects of people taking responsibility for leadership. We may choose to limit our reading and interpretation to the fact that they took responsibility. Alternatively, we may concentrate on the fact that in all instances, justice was the objective.

Essentially the texts alert us to the fact that with leadership comes responsibility. And when everything is said and done, justice should be served. As Christians we may add, “...the name of God should be glorified”. Our Christian faith compels us to follow the example of Jesus.

The Power of People

The great commandment is that we should love our neighbour as we love ourselves (Mt 22:39). Greater love has no one than he (she) that is prepared to lay down his/her life for a neighbour (Luke 10:25...).

In the struggle against apartheid, oppressed South Africans used a slogan “Amandla Ngawerthu”, translated as “power to the people.” The gains made against the evils of a diabolical apartheid regime are largely due to the people taking responsibility for justice, freedom and equality. The people had to act for our aspirations to be realised.

It is sad and unfortunate when people rely solely on their democratically elected leadership to have their aspirations and needs met. In so doing, people are transferring the

responsibility of power to leaders. We have learned that in such situations power has the tendency to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

People therefore have the responsibility to manage and control all forms of power. This is what power to the people means.

It is equally important to note that no power is given, indeed power has to be taken. This search and struggle for power only has meaning when it is intended to benefit all humanity and creation.

Power and Violence

All humanity and creation is groaning as a result of the abuse of power.

At a micro level such abuse is prevalent in families where we witness violence against women and children, what we call domestic violence. At a societal level we are experiencing increases in criminal violence. At national and international levels we observe wars and violent conflicts of unimaginable proportions.

Power or the search for power stands at the centre of almost all cases of violent conflict. The attacker wants control and power over the defender, while the latter wants to retain control and power.

The groaning of creation is exemplified by the levels of global warming and environmental degradation that we all observe. The human urge to subjugate, control and acquire riches is threatening our environment and the planet earth. This destructive human urge is inextricably linked with power. This requires us to look at power and governance.

Power and Governance

After God created the universe 'it was good' (Gen.1:25). And God gave us, human beings, dominion to rule over creation- every living thing that moves upon the earth (Gen 1:28).

In our human wisdom we elected to appoint others to rule on our behalf: governments. However, Romans 13 and Revelations 13 remind those who rule that they have no power other than that given to them by God.

The power that God graciously grants is rooted in the principle of diakonia (service). All people and leaders have the God-given responsibility to serve with love, care, compassion and the grace God commands. Leadership is not about power, but SERVICE (diakonia) to the glory of our Creator. For God has not given us a spirit of fear but of power and of love and of a sound mind (2 Tim 1:7). Our wisdom and power come from the Holy Spirit, and to obtain them we must be in constant communion with the Holy Spirit, which is why we are told to pray on all occasions, and all the time (1 Thess. 5:17).



On Justice

by Aneeqa Maria Akhtar

There is a communion with God that asks for nothing, yet asks for everything

In the twilight of life God will not judge us on our earthly possessions and human success, but rather on how much we have loved. Therefore, “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with Him”.

We ought always to deal justly, not only with those who are just to us, but likewise to those who endeavour to injure us. For if we return evil deed for evil deed, we will be guilty of the same vice. We the ‘living letters’ observed in the Amish community during our visit, that anyone can love peace and justice. However, Jesus didn’t say ‘blessed are the peace lovers’ or that we should love justice. He said, ‘blessed are the peace makers’ and bids us to act justly. The Amish community is filled with this same spirit of forgiveness and justice. Not only do they understand the passion of Christ, they live it in their day-to-day lives. Nowhere is this seen better than in their collective forgiveness of Roberts and their compassion for the ‘murderer’s’ family. However, “If you perpetuate injustice for long, it will create violence”.

There is racial discrimination in the greater Philadelphia area. There is racial discrimination as illustrated in the case of Jena. There is violence in the cities of New York, Houston, and New Orleans and in countries like Iraq, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and in the Middle East. In fact, violence is found all over the world; social, cultural or religious discrimination are evidence to the fact. Justice is moral or ethical and not simply legal; justice is about appropriate action taken to restore right relationships. That means we should think beyond the establishment of guilt and the passing out of sentences.

Lower your expectations of earth. This isn't heaven, so don't expect it to be.

Living through periods of extreme armed violence breeds a culture of violence, as seen when the influence and power of the military permeate into the previously unaffected areas of a society; as a result, violence infects the symbols, attitudes, values and beliefs that constitute that society’s culture, and crime, injustice and disorder increase, “driven principally by the legitimization of violence,” coupled with the return of unemployed combatants and the easy availability of weapons. These weapons feed the system of crime, smuggling, organised violence and thus breed injustice and insecurity. Injustice is a form of violence. It is reinforced when people are driven to use force to right wrongs; injustice often encourages the growth of political, ethical, and racial violence.

Give us, O Lord, a steadfast heart, which no unworthy affection may drag downwards; give us an unconquered heart, which no tribulation can wear out; give us an upright heart, which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside. Bestow upon us also, O' Lord our God, understanding to know you, diligence to seek you, wisdom to find you, and a faithfulness that may finally embrace you; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

My deepest hope is that I am ‘walking in His will’ and that he speaks to me His will.

Give Us, O Lord, a Steadfast Heart & Let the light of your face shine on us

On Amish Forgiveness

by Lina S. Moukheiber

The Power of Love

Violence in its cruelest form - answered by love in its purest form. The son of God spoke through them. A crucifix reminds us of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. He died for the forgiveness of our sins. They died for the forgiveness of Mr. Roberts' sins. A Christ-like resurrection, conquering death with the power of love. This was the Amish way - God's way - to respond to murder - Father, forgive Mr. Roberts for he did not know what he was doing - a call for forgiveness at the height of a tragic and immense human loss.

Mourning the victims and the perpetrator alike, pardoning an act of violence that put an end to the lives of four small school girls and wounded six others, was the Amish way to respond to the tragedy that fell upon the Nickel Mines School in Akron, Pennsylvania. What could other worldwide Christian communities learn about forgiveness from our friends the Amish? In embracing the Roberts family during their own loss, we find their message to us - the practice of forgiveness. (For more information, see *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* by Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, & David L. Weaver-Zercher, published by Jossey-Bass, Sept. 2007).

The Last of the 'Mohicans'

As believers in the theory of natural man, the Amish fundamental divide between society and human nature makes it easier for them to practice forgiveness and love. They are good because they are self-sufficient and thus not subject to the negative influences of political society. Their lifestyle seems to prove Jean Jacques Rousseau's theory of man's natural goodness. Man is likely to be corrupted by the artificial development of society through interdependence. Are the Amish "The Last of the Christians" in today's America?

Good Tortured

In his book *The Prophet*, Gibran Khalil Gibran, a Lebanese-American poet and visual artist, answers: "Of the good in you I can speak, but not of evil. For what is evil but good tortured by its own hunger and thirst? Verily when good is hungry it seeks food even in dark caves, and when it thirsts it drinks even of dead waters." Is Gibran's explanation of evil deeds coherent within the context of human nature? We mortals are fundamentally good, but it is society that corrupts. The Amish model affirms Jean Jacques Rousseau's and Gibran's vision on good and evil. Since society corrupts, then the world today is undeniably heading towards a perpetual struggle between the forces of good and evil.

Good and Evil

Beyond the creed that millions of Christians on this planet repeat on a daily basis in hundreds of different languages and dialects "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name: Thy kingdom come: Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread: and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation: but deliver us from evil"; how many truly practice what

they say? A rapid historical countdown over the past century could perhaps make us stop and think: what did we Christians do to each other? what did we do to others? Slavery, genocides, atomic bombs, religious wars and military occupations; this is how it seems we forgave those who trespassed against us.

The Face of God

Healing the wounds the Amish way; based on God's way. The challenge here, not for the Amish but for the rest of us, is the practice of forgiveness. For this matter, all I could see in the face of our Amish hosts was the face of God. To my mind there is still a huge gap in the East and West between clergy and laity involved in dialogue for reconciliation and peace and communities affected by violence and war. Let us be honest: for most of the victims of violence, dialogue for reconciliation and peace might just as well have been conducted and drawn up on a different planet for all they know. Some strategies for bringing the two together have got to be thought out. Amish forgiveness - practiced instantly, naturally and lovingly - is an obligation for the rest of us to contemplate and put into action.

The task ahead is enormous. It demands reconciliation within the family of God where all kinds of injustices are radically challenged. If this does not follow, Christians are being inconsistent in the face of God.

A Christian Obligation

God speaks through his Son in Jesus but also through his Spirit in life in general, and through all religions and cultures. The Amish listened to God's revelation, dictated by the spirit of forgiveness.

Jesus Christ reveals our Trinitarian God, but it is the same God that also reveals its Godself through other manifestations outside Christianity. My Lebanese-American duality, enriched by indigenous Christian roots and traditions yet intertwined with the religion and culture of Islam, keeps reminding me of our Christian obligation to listen to others and practice forgiveness for the sake of peace, in the name of Jesus Christ.

Practical Hints

Faces of God were seen through the faces of the sons and daughters of the Amish community living in Pennsylvania. The world is full of such faces, their untold stories of love, peace and forgiveness yet to be shared. Living Letters brings home to me how much more important it is to relate to people than it is to hold meetings and produce papers, reports and recommendations.



On Community

by Corina Thompson

A crucial and connecting element in the stories that we heard throughout the trip was the concept of community as a player in peace and reconciliation efforts. From Brooklyn to Nickel Mines and on to Philadelphia and New Orleans, an intense sense of the importance of community ties and collective values enhanced our understanding of peacemaking on a grassroots level.

The first planned interaction the delegation experienced was with members of the Salam Arabic Lutheran Church and other individuals and religious leaders from the community in Bay Ridge, a Brooklyn neighbourhood. As discussion focused on the Arab American's experience in post 9-11 New York, it became increasingly clear that the Reverend Khader El-Yateem, Salam's pastor had created a sanctuary out of the church for the local neighbourhood—a place where both before and after the events of 9-11, members of the community would come for discussion and dialogue on how to build neighbourhood bonds peacefully between the different faiths and groups in the area. Because of successful interfaith dialogue engaged in pre 9-11, immediately following the attack on the World Trade Center, community leaders and members descended upon the church, recognizing it as a place to discuss and take action. Delegates had the opportunity to mingle and discuss with these leaders the ways in which the neighbourhood has been supported and enhanced through the peaceful dialogue and camaraderie created around the church and its pastor.

The next place that the delegation grappled with the idea of community in peace building was in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Here we lunched in a traditional Amish family's home. A brother from the Nickel Mines Accountability Committee dined with us and we discussed the experience and effects of the shooting last September in which a local man entered a schoolhouse and shot 10 girls before killing himself. The story reached national news in part because of the sensationalism of the event—the horrible drama of such an evil act touching such a peaceful people. But it was the community's response to the shooting that soon made headlines.

The Amish in the area immediately extended forgiveness to the shooter, sharing with his wife and children a portion of the funds donated to the victims and their families. As with the rest of the world, this unconditional forgiveness was stunning to the members of this delegation, who used the interaction as a means to understand how such an act occurs. The humble Amish man who spoke with us expressed the community's confusion at the outside world's response to their forgiveness, reminding us that it is Christ's mandate to all Christians, not just to the Amish.

In the discussion at lunch and afterwards the role of community in forgiveness was questioned. Each delegate expressed an awe of the complete and total forgiveness extended on behalf of the Amish; a forgiveness that seemed to come automatically and from within, rather than being externally motivated. It seemed clear that this was a communal forgiveness, wherein personal emotion and reaction come together to be healed in a forgiveness of the whole body. We questioned whether or not external communities could achieve the same direct and immediate forgiveness in a similar situation. Clearly by

separating themselves from the values of the outside world this community is more able to focus on the very real teachings of peace and forgiveness that the Gospel demands. For Christians living in the world, how do we diminish the effects of the media and other sources that bombard us with images and ideas of retaliation and justice? How do we experience personally mercy and forgiveness in our peacemaking?

This luncheon was perhaps the shortest of all interactions throughout the trip, but it may have affected us more directly than any other. Each delegate and staff member found themselves coming away with perhaps even more questions than before the interaction took place, questions of how to bring this Christ centered forgiveness into our own lives and communities.

Upon leaving Lancaster County we headed immediately to Philadelphia where another type of community was awaiting us. The Reverend Dr. William Shaw and members of the White Rock Baptist Church (NBC Inc.) over which he presides opened their homes and their hearts to the members of the delegation. Here the delegates had the opportunity to stay with members of the congregation; connecting with this faith community in a more intimate way.

The next morning at a prayer and praise breakfast, Philadelphia city leaders such as the mayor and the police chief were invited to share about the city's efforts at fighting violent crime. As with Pastor El-Yateem in Brooklyn, it was made clear that the influence of Dr. Shaw was far reaching in the community and that his work as an individual leader affected peacemaking not only in his congregation but also helped to pull people together throughout the city. The straightforward presentations made by city leaders helped restore some collective faith and hope in the delegates that issues of violence are in fact being competently addressed, at least in the city of Philadelphia.

The last leg of our trip was to New Orleans—a city steeped in tradition and community spirit. Hillary, a member of the Beecher Memorial Church, explained that unlike most other cities, New Orleans keeps her people close. There traditionally has not been much outward migration from the city; with lifetime residents feeling particularly connected to the distinct culture and way of life. Here we found a city battling against the long-term effects of the hurricanes of 2005 and the government's slow and disastrously inadequate response. With many homes completely destroyed, the people who haven't left and the few that have returned after their forced exodus immediately following the storm, are struggling to recreate the communities and neighbourhoods that they once had. For those who have stayed and are trying to rebuild, violent crime is an everyday threat that they live with.

A sobering end to a long journey, we found ourselves searching for hope in the ruins. Once again, that hope seemed to be offered in the faith communities throughout the city each doing their small part to invite peace and safety. Delegates divided up and attended different congregations and in the evening were invited to dinner in the home of one of the Beecher Memorial congregation members. In these settings we heard countless stories of these brave individuals working together to rebuild their homes and neighbourhoods. Perhaps this was our final lesson in community peace building—that as individuals resolve to rebuild, to forgive and to create safe spaces around them, they in turn affect and bring together the community to help solidify and invite long term and reconciling change.

On Reconciliation

by Marcelo Schneider

The DOV's Living Letters visits to the U.S. were marked by clear expressions of sorrow, solidarity and commitment. These three concepts are helpful tools to reflect on the theme of reconciliation as one of the key issues of this endeavour.

Sorrow

In all processes unleashed by violent means there is sorrow and suffering. No exceptions. And so was the case in many places we visited along the way. From the pain of the Amish families and communities in Pennsylvania to the anonymous coping of thousands of relatives of the victims of homicide in Philadelphia, we witnessed how hard it is, not only from the Christian perspective, to deal with such deep feelings that follow acts of violence.

Social and psychological causes were mixed in the analysis of the violence cases we heard about. Violence caused by individuals that acted with no clear reason or based on feelings of revenge, anger eagerness. But there is also structural violence, which sometimes has roots so deeply hidden that we tend to believe they've just been there all the time.

Individual sin and structural sin are issues that were part of the Latin American Liberation Theology reflections. The relationship between what we, as Christians, are called to be in this world are closely related to the consequences and the potential that our actions have to change the structures we live in.

Such liberation theologies were shared and developed in other contexts - such as Asia and Africa - places and spaces where the struggle for justice is based on the concept that Christian theology is also a process of continuous transformation of the Church itself, a God-given purpose for the world. The dialogue of different groups of Christians, started by the simple realisation that they were experiencing the same kind of sorrow caused by situations or structures of violence, was the first methodological step toward the development of engaged theology.

Times of sorrow are often marked by extreme feelings of loneliness. When we have in our families someone who is suffering from a disease or has experienced a great loss, we visit them. By spending time with them we are not showing them that we are there to tell them how and what they should or could have done or to witness personally the intensity of their pain; we are just there. And 'being there is what the Living Letters is about in the first place. In this sense, our visits included a pastoral aspect.

Solidarity

The Living Letters visits were also marked by examples of solidarity. From the volunteer work being tirelessly done in the Mennonite Central Committee, in Akron, Pennsylvania, to the moving expression of mutual compassion of the religious leaders gathered at the Salam Arabic Lutheran Church in Brooklyn, NYC, we saw people hand in hand, trying to show their communities and the world that they are there for each other.

We recognise our own wounds and those we have caused. We recognize that our omission is a sin and that the expression of our solidarity is also a call from the Gospel. We cope with our human feelings of anger and disbelief but also with our Christian faith, trying to find a coherent way with which to point to non violent ways of dealing with such situations. Coping together is by excellence an act of solidarity. And therein lies the second step in the process of reconciliation.

The “Accountability Committee” formed by members of the Amish community in Paradise, Pennsylvania, was created right after a shocking act of violence caused by a stranger who took the lives of children and of himself in a school nearby. The immediate Amish solidarity response is an example of Christian love, especially when we consider that not only the girls who were victims in this episode and their families were immediately supported by the community, but also the perpetrator’s family received spiritual and financial assistance.

It is hard to cope and it’s even harder to cope alone. Realities of violence are not immediately changed and this might discourage people along the way. But the wounds that are left by acts and structures of violence can also be dealt with in the midst of the community, reinforcing the mutual feeling of identity and accountability. “It is a long way to be walked alone. It is a lighter way if we walk together”, as reads an anonymous quote, a personal favourite of the WCC’s General Secretary.

Commitment

Reconciliation is such an important concept that is also considered by some groups as an institution. The Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) welcomed the Living Letters team during the annual festivities of their U.S. office. People who are committed to peace building initiatives organize themselves to make a difference in the contexts within which they live.

On the other side of the country, down in the South, we have been to the Lower 9th Ward, which is the New Orleans’ neighbourhood most affected by Hurricane Katrina. We have witnessed the consequences of natural and man-made disasters. But, two years after this happened, one still witnesses the need for this city to be reconciled with their own country. Most of the reconstruction work there is being done by the churches and Habitat for Humanity. How can these people feel that they are part of the same nation when, after so long, the federal administration still shows signs of disregard?

There is a third way on the process for reconciliation: commitment. If we don’t commit, our community is not well based. If we don’t commit, our sorrow and solidarity will vanish as things gradually get a little better or as time simply goes by. Only true commitment brings the constant prophetic call of the Gospel, which is the call for mutual responsibility now.

Instead of a conclusion: study war no more

“It’s easier to leave than to be left behind”. That’s what Michael Stipe sings in the song “Leaving New York”. Stipe is the lead singer of R.E.M. and they are one of the most intense U.S. artists I have ever heard. Through Stipe’s lyrics and the group’s music, I tried to process all I’ve seen in North America, for they are some of those who are able to read the country in a very critical yet poetic way.

It should be easy to leave all we’ve seen in the U.S. behind and face our own problems. All of us come from contexts in which there is so much to do, and not only in terms of overcoming violence. But how could we not be touched and transformed by what we’ve witnessed, by the spontaneous comparisons we did between the U.S. reality and what we have back home? The “ground zero for every social, racial or economical problem in the U.S.”, as the North American President for the WCC, Rev. Dr Bernice Powell-Jackson refers to New Orleans, is a scandal of tragedy and beauty. After two years, the strength of the disaster and the resultant social problems have called to the public’s eye attention through the energy of these jazz musicians.

I worry about the ones we left behind. I worry about the hope they put, not only on us as members and staff of the Living Letters, but also on the World Council of Churches. We witnessed their sorrow, and showed our solidarity as well as the U.S. people showed their solidarity with our home countries. And we have to honour that by committing to the promise of “studying war no more”.



On Overcoming and Preventing Violence

by Hansulrich Gerber

Overcoming violence was a major focus of the Living Letters team's visit to the US. The prevalence of violence and the beneficial or even salvific power it is being given in society and politics in the US is known around the world. From conquest to gold mines to self-defense and to world domination, the gun has played a key role. It is no coincidence that the freedom of the individual to carry a hand gun is being fought for with utter militancy by many in the US, as if it were the penultimate measure of freedom. Perhaps for some it is.

In order to overcome - and to prevent - violence, it must be approached in many different ways and from many different angles. The most common approach is that of a generally moral-emotional response to physical violence after it occurs. While violence is despised as devastating, it is, at the same time, captivating people's imaginations and fascinating their minds. How else could one explain the media obsession with violent incidents, which, next to celebrities, are the most commonly featured?

Overcoming Violence is a matter of lived beauty in the face of violence. Preventing violence requires an evidence-based approach. The Living Letters team found both of these in the communities visited. We were moved by the beauty of human beings and their interaction in the face of excruciating violence.

Aside from the emotional and repressive responses to violence which seem to be natural and human, there is a systematic approach that deserves mainstreaming: prevention. "We have become pretty good at apprehension, but we are poor on prevention", the Attorney General of California told participants at the 2nd Milestone Conference of the [WHO's Violence Prevention Campaign](#) in 2005. A lot of money and much political, social and human energy are spent on repression, legal action, punishment and incarceration in response to violent behavior, while little attention is being given to the prevention of violence. "As a politician you are not going to be elected on the basis of your emphasis or track record on prevention, but rather on getting tough", the Attorney General continued.

This, in part, is the strength of the [WHO's](#) approach to violence and its prevention: to look at violence, not primarily in terms of criminal justice or policing, but in terms of public health. Violence is seen as a social disease, and violence prevention is made a public health priority. The bad news is that gun violence seems to be ever more rampant. However, there is good news: some church related, inter-religious and government or civil society actors have begun to work together to implement preventive measures.

The second amendment of the US Constitution reads: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a Free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed." It strikes me that the right to bear arms comes right after the first amendment which guarantees free speech. In the popular mind, and foremost to the very powerful gun lobby in the US, this means a guarantee for the individual to have a right to own and carry a gun.

The [Coalition to Stop Gun Violence](#) documents the devastating reality: about 30,000 people die annually in the US from injuries by firearms. The supply and demand of small arms and hand guns play an essential role in this and to work on prevention of gun violence means to limit access to hand guns, especially for individuals at risk. At the same time, weapons trade needs to be reduced and regulated on an international level. The US is among the biggest producers and traders of weapons of all kinds that feed local or regional armed conflicts all over the world. [Control Arms](#) is working on promoting reduction and regulation of arms trade. We also hear about [God not Guns](#), Faith in Action to Prevent Gun Violence.

The Living Letters team to the US found many witnesses of violence prevention, heard of creative prevention initiatives and was impressed with the vigor, commitment and collaboration among people engaged in simple or complex acts of just peace.

There is a fluid boundary between advocacy and prevention. When Christians, Muslims and Jews meet for potluck dinners and neighborhood events in Brooklyn, their togetherness can very well be considered long term violence prevention. The [Fellowship of Reconciliation](#) (FOR), the US branch of the [International Fellowship of Reconciliation](#) (IFOR), contributes to violence prevention by its persevering advocacy against war and through training in non-violence. The [Nonviolent Peace force](#) received an award from the Fellowship of Reconciliation for its work as a nonpartisan unarmed peacekeeping force in areas of armed conflict and its work in training civilians around the world. Here again, violence is prevented by promoting alternative measures and by building non-violent capacity on the ground.

The Coalition to Stop Gun Violence is an educational and advocacy initiative but each of its successes will contribute to preventing gun violence. The work of the Washington D.C. offices of the Church of the Brethren, United Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Mennonite Churches and other denominational offices as well as the [National Council of Churches of Christ in the US](#) contribute to violence prevention by building awareness among legislators about the impact of US domestic and foreign policy on people's lives and by advocating for policies and measures that promote peace with justice and human security over and above national or financial interests. As well, the [Global Priorities Campaign](#) aims to build constituency for shifting budget priorities from military to social and educational spending, with a special focus on child survival. The astronomical figures of military spending of the US stands over against 15 Million malnourished children in the US itself, not to speak of the children of Iraq.

The World Health Assembly passed [Resolution 49/25](#) in 1996 stating that violence prevention is a public health priority. What does that have to do with idyllic country and farm life of the Lancaster County Amish in Pennsylvania? Violence is a world and social disease from which the Amish are relatively safe. The violence level among Amish is very low as compared to the rest of US society. Yet they are not spared. In October 2006 an English man from the community shot ten Amish school girls, killing five of them in their school house. The Amish prevent gun violence by not owning and not carrying guns. They refuse to resort to violence because it is not the way of Jesus. Even more important, but in consistent consequence, forgiveness for those who commit violence is normal Christian practice, as stated in the Lord's prayer and in Jesus' commandments. [Mennonite Central](#)

[Committee](#), in which some Amish communities participate, launched a program for children whose parents are in prison. Violence prevention is most effective when done with young children.

In New Orleans, our last stop, we stood silently in front of a panel posted on the wall of the Episcopal Church. Over some time now the names and age of people killed in the city are being added to the list, daily. A sad count in a place apparently abandoned by the federal government and left to its destiny - poverty, racism, unemployment, future floods, and in all of this street and gang violence. While there is no recipe for violence prevention, two things seem to be required: an evidence-based approach and cooperation among all partners of society: Government, civil society groups and religious communities. Alas, many of those seem to have other priorities. Yet there is the good news of a growing sense of urgency and also a determination for creative collaboration. This is what the Living Letters found in the US: Churches and Christians have a message of good news to bring into the devastation of violent realities: non-violence is possible and constructive; it is the way of God incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. Peace and non-violence have no easy answers or recipes - they are difficult, confusing, lengthy and costly processes carried out in truth, love, mercy and compassion. These four biblical qualities make for sustainable violence prevention. They bring forth the beauty of humanity in the image of God. We were struck that in places of dreadful darkness the beauty shines even brighter, be it through music, visual arts, or the simple yet profound act of offering hospitality and sharing a meal.



Annex I – Participants

Rev. Edwin Makue is a minister of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa who is the General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches (SACC)

www.sacc.org.za.

He is often in the leadership role, facilitating cooperation and liaising with various groups. His involvement in the ecumenical movement spans two decades, beginning with SACC in 1986 as a field worker and programme facilitator. His responsibilities included providing material and moral support to victims of unjust prosecution, political prisoners and their dependents. He went on to direct the Council's Democracy Education programme from its inception in 1992 before becoming head of the Justice Ministries Unit in 1994. For the past eighteen months, he has served as the SACC's Deputy General Secretary, in addition to his Justice Ministries post.

Ms Lina Moukheiber, a Greek Orthodox (Patriarchate of Antioch) public health specialist who has worked in AIDS prevention, Maternal Health and Family Planning in the U.S., Middle East and Africa, and is Director of Development at the Saint George Hospital in Lebanon. Lina previously worked with the World Council of Churches, establishing its Middle East regional office.

Dr Marcelo Schneider, a theologian specialized in ecumenical social ethics who is the Ecumenical Officer of the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil. His strong points include planning and implementation in a variety of projects with the WCC, the Lutheran World Federation, such as the World Social Forum

Ms Aneeqa Maria Akhtar, a Roman Catholic human rights lawyer from Pakistan who specialises in violence against women and children and is a member of the international DOV Reference Group. Her strengths include effectiveness in team negotiations, advocacy and lobbying. Her work with CLAAS (www.angelfire.com) in Pakistan has brought legal assistance and support to many women and children in her country as she blends compassion with her legal know how.

Rev. Deborah DeWinter, an ordained minister of the United Church of Christ, is the Programme Executive for the US for the WCC. Following graduation from Yale Divinity School, Deborah served as a missionary in Hong Kong with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America developing advocacy and pastoral care ministries with Filipino migrant workers and facilitating the development of the Hong Kong Fellowship of Christian Artists, developing special outreach programs for refugees and leading young adult service projects and serving as pastor of a Chinese Lutheran congregation. She has spent two years as a consultant for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Resettlement Section in Geneva and was Executive Director of FilmAid International in New York just prior to accepting her appointment with the World Council of Churches

Rev. Hansulrich Gerber, a Mennonite pastor from the Swiss Jura, is WCC Coordinator for the Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV). His office is responsible

for facilitating the DOV through its web site, the annual focus, and general networking of churches and movements worldwide. He worked several years for the Mennonite Peace Committee in a variety of capacities including Secretary for Programme. Prior to joining the WCC, Hansuli served 10 years as Europe Director for the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).

Ms. Corina Thompson, a young adult media consultant & videographer, was instrumental in organizing the logistics of the Living Letters team visit in partnership with **Ms. Anna Liv Gibbons**, a 2007 summer intern in the US Office of the WCC from Grinnell College supported by a vocational discernment grant from the Lilly Foundation. Corina Thompson, who filmed the entire team visit, is producing a video of the Living Letters journey to the United States.

Annexe II – Press Releases

<http://overcomingviolence.org/en/news-and-events/feature-articles/dov-features-english/article/1323/living-letters-delegation-2.html>

<http://overcomingviolence.org/en/news-and-events/feature-articles/dov-features-english/article/1323/gun-control-issues-peace.html>

<http://overcomingviolence.org/en/news-and-events/news/dov-news-english/article/1323/living-letters-to-the-us-1.html>

<http://overcomingviolence.org/en/news-and-events/news/dov-news-english/article/1298/churches-in-the-us-to-sha.html>

Blog by Marcelo Schneider: <http://overcomingviolence.org/en/about-dov/living-letters-visits/usa/blogs/marcelo-s-blog.html>

Annex III – Quotes

By meetings like this we are doing the best thing we can to please our Lord.....We must emphasize our equality. We are in agreement that we all believe in God, that we are children of Adam and Eve...We are together against decadence and corruption. We are together for love, peace and mercy.

Imam at Salam Lutheran Church

The more we have face to face encounters, the more we understand the other – the better I can practice my Christianity.

Rev. David Rommereim – Church of the Good Shepherd, Brooklyn

The Nature of the Living Letters process and activities is not polemic. It is a hearing, listening, reconciling approach... Something happened to me at Abyssinian – The African American approach was very pastoral, very caring. I was impressed that the Elders had responsibility for sharing the Eucharistic elements. They were respectful, proud, had integrity, dignity, self-respect in how they accepted this responsibility....It was more than a visit for me, it was transformative.... The Living Letters is what people expect the WCC to do....I also noticed that the common thread in all we saw is that pain and violence is 'man-made.' And also that people look at the WCC with 'big eyes' – expecting us to do something....The Living Letters visit is adding bricks – not to a levy, but to a bridge.

Marcelo Schneider

We owe it to ourselves and our Creator to use our unique place as Church – to bring everyone together..... In this peace work we are doing, we should hold each others' hands. We should never take peace for granted. I was deeply moved by the human ability to get up. It makes me feel good to be part of this Living Letters team....We are not here because of what we do, but because of what God has done for us. One of the obstacles in overcoming violence is the inability to forgive. Why is it that we though in South Africa that Katrina is over? Here you get the deep sense of disruption, not only in the life of society but also of the church. That's what broke the oppression: the love of people

Eddie Makue

It was the first time I've ever felt that way at Church – something new and great for me...I was very struck by the words in the bulletin: "When you enter the church, speak to God; while in church, let God speak to you; after church, go and speak to people."

Aneeqa Maria Akhtar

I hope the WCC will go forward with this Living Letters model because it makes real the visible unity of the Church. .. take back to the WCC that it is models and events like this that are the strength of the membership of the WCC, we cannot do enough to bring people together, i.e. in the urgency of violence, WCC should see this as a model, make it real, and an opportunity for everyone. This reflects the unity Christ speaks of. This is the WCC at its best.

Angelique Walker-Smith

Our youth is more sinned against than sinning. Society has done a lot of violence and this has made youth angry. If you perpetrate injustice for a long time, it leads to violence. The more justice is practiced, the more peace is experienced.

Father Tom – founder of the Ulster Project in New Orleans

We need to travel to the edges as Jesus did. We can't be afraid to go to the margins, to touch and to be touched.

Speaker from Covenant House, New Orleans

I am reminded of the story of the friends of the sick man who opened the roof to get their friend to Jesus. The churches have been grace on the ground, but justice has not been done; we need to ask the hard questions... This city is still in need of healing and reconciliation... New Orleans is the Ground Zero of every racial, social and economic injustice in the United States. I am an equal opportunity stone-thrower: this has been a failure of government at every level, before during and after the storm.

Bernice Powell-Jackson on advocacy for New Orleans

The highlight for me is that I came and I saw. Unless you come and witness for yourself, it doesn't hit you. All the meetings and reports out of the WCC – these don't work; for me, the Living Letters does work. This visit to the Amish community fundamentally changed me. They practice word for word what Jesus calls us to do – to forgive, to pick up the broken pieces and move forward....The only way to peace is to forgive each other the sins we have caused each other....Reconciliation comes with forgiveness. There is no other hope for peace.

Lina Moukheiber

The whole trip was like a thickening plot – the inter-connectedness. There is no foreign suffering; if you are ready to be there, it is your own

Hansulrich Gerber

I was very moved by the fact that after the offering was taken and received, when the Pastor blessed the offering, she gave thanks for what had been given, but also blessed those who wanted to give but couldn't. This is a thread running through the entire visit. Churches and people are encouraged to be persistent, staying their course of working in solidarity for the common good, pursuing justice and peace. At the centre of all this are the Amish, the profound simplicity of faith.

Deborah DeWinter

"When the people lead, the leaders will follow"

Bumper sticker

God is in me, God is for me, God is with me, God works through me.

Brenda Girton-Mitchell, Associate General Secretary, Justice and Advocacy, National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA

We should be asking more of them (Congress) or government, be better organized to counter gun violence, the parties and the House don't do enough because we don't ask them to.

Michael Livingstone – Pres of NCCC USA

Faith and moral imperatives bring about legislation

Acacia Salatti Democratic Faith Working Group

90% of mental health records are not in the data base for background checks before gun sales....In 30 states, cash and carry gun sales take place at gun fairs. Cash and carry is legal in the United States because the gun lobby fights to keep loopholes open. In the US more preschool children were killed in 2004 by firearms than law enforcement officers.

**Ladd Everitt, Director of Communications,
Coalition to Stop Gun Violence**



Annex IV – Recommendations

- ☼ That a US DOV meeting be held in New Orleans. It should include young adult leaders.

- ☼ That the US Conference for the WCC take the lead in advocating for a special domestic track on the Gulf Coast at the 2008 Ecumenical Advocacy Days (7-10 March 2008, Washington, DC) and raise the issues of the right to return and relations between African Americans and Latinos in New Orleans

- ☼ That the Global Priorities Campaign be further affirmed and supported in its efforts

- ☼ That the CCIA include military spending in its disarmament agenda

- ☼ That forces be mobilized to support efforts on the small arms issue

- ☼ That the WCC spend more on implementing Living letters. "This is WCC at its best" one CC member at every LL team, ecumenical officers

- ☼ That a database of initiatives, people, organisation visited by LLs be established

- ☼ That the first Living Letters visit planned for 2008 take place in a well structured context

- ☼ That a manual for LL be developed

- ☼ That the next visit of the WCC General Secretary to the US include a meeting with hosts of of the US LL visit

- ☼ That DOV have a deliberate campaign on improving dialogue and emphasizing its unique role

- ☼ That churches in crisis situations be accompanied - New Orleans as a possibility

- ☼ That the DOV record 'best practice models' and publicise them

- ☼ That 'Blessed are the Peacemaker Awards' be given by LL team visits

Annex V – Itinerary of the Living Letters Team Visit to the United States

Friday, September 14 – New York arrival and orientation

Saturday, September 15, 2007 – New York City - Brooklyn

Salam Arabic Lutheran Church

- Muslim-Christian relations in post 9/11 New York City

Dinner with local Interfaith leaders

Sunday, September 16, 2007 – New York City - Harlem

9:00-10:30 a.m. Worship at Abyssinian Baptist Church

- Greetings from **Rev. Dr. Calvin Butts**, President, Council of Churches of New York

– Nyack, NY

2:00-5:00 p.m. Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) Gathering

- Presentation by Living Letters delegates
- Various musical performances and presentations
- Presentation of FOR Peace Prizes

Dinner with FOR leaders

Monday, September 17, 2007 – Washington D.C.

Dinner & Welcome

- **Rev. Phil Jones**, Director, Church of the Brethren Witness/Washington Office

Monument Tour

- A look at war monuments from the non-violent faith perspective

Tuesday, September 18, 2007 – Washington D.C.

Meeting at the NCCC Office

Welcome & Introduction by Rev. Brenda Girton-Mitchell, Associate General Secretary, Justice and Advocacy, National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA
Special guests include **seminarians from Wesley Theological Seminary**

Discussion on Domestic Gun Control & Arms Sales

- **Mr. Greg Smith**, Senator Feinstein's Staff, US Senate
- **Mr. Ladd Everitt**, Million Mom March DC Chapter
- **Mr. Scott Stedjan**, Arms Sales Transfer Group & Oxfam, America

Discussion on the Iraq War

- **Dr. Elizabeth Ferris**, Senior Fellow, The Brookings Institute, Moderator
- **Dr. Antonios Kireopoulos**, Associate General Secretary for International Affairs and Peace, NCCCUSA

- **“Out of Iraq Caucus” of the US House of Representatives**
(invited)

Luncheon & Table Discussions

- **With Heads of Washington Offices, Church Organizations**

Capitol Tour

Wednesday, September 19, 2007 – Akron, PA

Meeting with Mennonite Central Committee International and US

Visit the MCC Material Resource Center

Visit to the Amish community near Nickel Mines

Wednesday, September 19, 2007 – Philadelphia, PA

Dinner with Host families and US DOV Committee members, White Rock Baptist Church

The Rev. Dr. William J. Shaw, Pastor & President National Baptist Convention USA, Inc.

The Rev. Dr. Angelique Walker-Smith, Ecumenical Representative, National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. & Co-Chair of WCC-DOV for USA

Thursday, September 19, 2007 – Philadelphia, PA

8:00-10 a.m. **Prayer and Praise Breakfast for Peace**
White Rock Baptist Church

10:30 a.m. **Press Conference**

Activities with Dr. Shaw and Local Community & Church Leaders

- Tour of Philadelphia churches
- Briefing with Dr. Shaw on peace and community efforts

Friday, September 21, 2007 – New York City – United Nations

8:00-9:00 a.m. **Breakfast with delegation of Protestant Church in Germany EKD**

- Sponsored by the **United Nations Liaison Office of the World Council of Churches** 777 UN Plaza Suite 9D
- Endorsed by the **Ecumenical Working Group**
- Hosted at the **Church Center for the United Nations**

9:30 a.m. **Peace Bell Ceremony**

- Ringing of the Bell by **Mr. Ban Ki Moon**, Secretary General of the United Nations

11:30 a.m. **Prayer Service**

- Sponsored by the **Ecumenical Working Group**
- **The Rev. Kathleen Stone**, Chaplain, presiding
- **Tillman Chapel**, Church Center for the United Nations

1:30 p.m. **Panel “Voices of Peace: Conversations with Living Letters”**

- 2nd floor, Church Center for the United Nations

3:00 a.m. **Reception**

- 2nd floor, Church Center for the United Nations

Saturday, September 22, 2007 – New Orleans

Lunch with Interfaith Group

Tour of city

Meeting with Artists

Debriefing

Sunday, September 23, 2007 – New Orleans

9:00 a.m. Attend local churches for Sunday Services

Debriefing

Host Churches and Organizations

Salam Arabic Lutheran Church, affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, is a multicultural church in Brooklyn, New York that ministers to immigrants from the Middle East. <http://www.arabicbible.com/salam>

Abyssinian Baptist Church is a historic as well as politically and culturally vital church serving the African American community in Harlem, New York City. The Pastor, Rev. Dr. Calvin Butts, President of the Council of Churches of New York, is nationally renowned for his critical thinking relative to urban culture and the “hip-hop” generation. www.abyssinian.org

Fellowship of Reconciliation is an interfaith organization carrying on programs and educational projects concerned with domestic and international peace and justice, nonviolent alternatives to conflict, and the rights of conscience. www.forusa.org

The Brookings Institute is an independent research organization focusing on government and public policy issues and located in Washington DC. www.brookings.edu

Church of the Brethren Washington Office <http://www.brethren.org/genbd/WitnessWashOffice.html>

Mennonite Central Committee is a relief, development, and peace agency of the North American Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. www.mcc.org

MCC Material Resource Center. At this center the MCC gathers practical and ordinary necessities to send out to communities in need.

White Rock Baptist Church is a historical Black Missionary Baptist Church in Western Philadelphia under the dynamic leadership of the Reverend Dr. William J. Shaw who serves as the President of the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. The “Convention” is the largest African-American religious organization in the USA. The “Convention” was founded in 1880. Dr. Shaw has been President since 2000. The “Convention” is a charter Church (Convention) of the WCC and the NCCC. www.whiterockbaptist.org

The Church Center for the United Nations is owned by the United Methodist Church and houses the UN liaison offices for various church organizations, including the WCC.