

BUILDING PEACEFUL, SAFER AND SECURE COMMUNITIES IN PLATEAU STATE

by Prof. Danny McCain
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to commemorate Nigeria's 60th (Diamond) Independence
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Introduction

Protocol

As we all know, traditionally Plateau State has been known as the state of “peace and tourism.” Though that has not been as true during the last 20 years, from my position as the Director of the Centre for Conflict Management and Peace Studies at the University of Jos, it is rewarding and encouraging to see the Plateau State government using this special holiday as a platform to promote peace. This is most commendable and most appropriate.

There are three key thoughts in the theme of our celebration that I would like to focus on today. If we can understand these three things and focus on them during this next year, we will be smiling when we come back to celebrate Independence Day 2021.

“Peaceful”

The word “peaceful” is the adjective form of the word peace. This is the most important word in the theme. One of the reasons we are here today is to explore ways to initiate peace and expand peace and restore peace. The first thing you would expect an academic to do is to establish a working definition of peace. So let me not disappoint you.

Definitions

Saleh Shahriah gives the following definition of peace;

Peace is a comprehensive and broad concept. At the macro parochial level, peace is the absence of conflict and war. At micro-level, peace is subjective, depending on the internal states of mind, body, and perceptions. Overall, peace is dependent on economic, political, religio-cultural, geographical, climatic and international systems. International balance of power is crucial for peace and cooperation.¹

Did that definition help you? I suspect they did not. I would guess you started thinking about lunch or something else when I got to the words “macro parochial level.” Let me try again to define or at least describe what peace really is here in Plateau State:

- Peace is being able to drive to Abuja without worrying about kidnappers and or running into a violent conflict.
- Peace is when we no longer hear sirens in the night and when the sound of gunfire has been forgotten.
- Peace is not having to explain to our children why we avoid certain parts of Jos.

¹ https://www.researchgate.net/post/What_is_the_best_definition_of_peace Accessed 19 September 2020

- Peace is when we go to funerals because people have died from old age not because they have died in some violent crisis.
- Peace is when Christians and Muslims can once again live in the same neighborhoods without fear or suspicion.
- Peace is when Muslims are able to visit Christians during Christmas and when Christians are able to visit their Muslim friends during salla.
- Peace is when Beroms enthusiastically support a Hausa student for a scholarship.
- Peace is when the Hausas in Jos North vote for an Anaguta man for LGA counselor.
- Peace will be when the boys from the Agaji (First Aid) guard the church during Christian celebrations and when the Boys' Brigade guard the mosque during Muslim celebrations.
- Peace is when farmers go back to paying money for fertilizer rather than for security.
- Peace is when we vote for people because of how well they represent their people not whether or not their names are James or Abubakar.
- Peace is when we can travel in our vehicles to Lagos at night without fear of harm.
- Peace is when we no longer get text messages on our phone accusing the other side of committing horrible atrocities.
- Peace is when the University of Jos' Centre for Conflict Management and Peace Studies has to close because there is no conflict to study and no peace to achieve.

Summary

The word "peaceful" has been supplemented by two other words in the theme for today. These are the words "safer" and "secure. These words are synonyms which means they mean essentially the same thing and are often used interchangeably. However, each of the words has a slightly different nuance.

"Safe" is a more general word. We use it to refer to safety on our highways and other things:

- Safe use electrical appliances and cutting tools
- Safe medicine and medical procedures
- Safe drinking water and disposal of waste

The word "secure" tends to be used more in association with physical welfare where we are protected from armed robbers, kidnappers, violent clashes and other illegal activities that negatively impact our health and property.

Therefore, the theme of the day is during this independence day celebration is a holistic theme in which we are thinking about and planning for all kinds of peace and security. If you die from an out-of-date medicine, or a road accident or from a community clash, you are dead and your family must deal with the negative consequences of that tragedy. So it is appropriate for the state government and all other stakeholders to give serious thought to all issues that will compromise the peace and security in Plateau State.

On this day that the nation celebrates 60 years of independence, we can look back and see many safety and security issues, including a civil war and other violent conflicts, HIV/AIDS, Ebola and COVID-19, floods and other natural disasters and many other things that have robbed us of peace. We pray the 60th year of Nigeria's existence will be the year we turn the corner and establish real comprehensive peace.

“Building”

The word “building ” suggests that you can do something about this peace.

- The theme does not say “waiting for peace.”
- The theme does not say “talking about peace.”
- The theme does not even say “praying for peace.”

“Building” is an active verb. The theme does not say the peace is “being built.” It implies that people are working together to shape and strengthen and build and maintain peace.

That means that there is activity; there is something that has to be done.

What does this mean for us in Plateau State?

Building peace means this is initiated by human beings.

Every house you see was built by someone. Every vehicle you see was engineered and built by someone. No building or vehicle was every created through just waiting for something to happen. Someone had an idea to create those things. They had a vision of what they wanted to see. They initiated the building process and eventually they saw the end result. Nothing significant in this world just happens. And peace is not going to happen by itself. Some person or group of persons are going to have to get a vision for the peace and initiate the process and follow up on the process until they see the finished process.

Building peace means you have control over how the peace will look.

The builder determines what the end result will be.

When I moved to UNIJOS in 1991, I employed a night guard and needed to build a little security house for him. I asked him if he knew a carpenter. He smiled and said, “I am a carpenter.” That was good news to me. I would have to look no further for a carpenter. Unfortunately, this was before I learned that in Nigeria, practically everyone has a very health self-image and believes he can do anything. The night guard started building the little building. The first problem I noticed was that the roof had no slope to it. It was flat. Second, I observed that the building was leaning seriously to one side. I knew my security house was really in trouble when I saw that he had put the zinc around the whole house and I had to suggest to him that the building would be more useful if he would put a door in it. The guard house was a disaster because of the limited vision and skills of the builder.

Obviously we want peace to be designed better and be guided by people with greater expertise. What will the peace look like?

- Will it be a just peace? Will one side rejoice at the peace while the other side weeps? Has the peace taken into consideration the issues raised by all sides?
- Will it be a complete peace? Have all the issues been resolved?
- Will it be a permanent peace? Will this peace initiative last only a short time ? Will our children have to renegotiate this peace again?
- Will it be a comprehensive peace?
 - Will it reach all parts of the community?
 - Will it deal with property issues?

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- Will it deal with agricultural issues?
- Will it deal with government appointment and benefits?
- Will it be a peace that provides opportunities for everyone?
- Will it be a practical and achievable peace?
- Will it only be words on paper or something that actually changes society?

Is this a peace reached only so the peace makers will be happy or does this really solve problems at the grass roots?

Building peace means work.

The word “building” is something I know a lot about. I was involved in construction work for 11 years prior to becoming a pastor and an academic. I had a small roofing business. I can assure you that building is hard, hot, tiresome but rewarding work. At the end of the day, you eat and sleep very well.

Nothing ever gets built without investing time and energy.

- Building peace will take work.
- Building peace will not be easy.
- Building peace will take discipline.
- Building peace will take perseverance.
- Building peace will involve mid-course corrections.
- Building peace is not for the lazy or those easily discouraged.

The point is obvious. We are not going to have peace unless we work at it. Peace is not going to come knocking at our door. We are going to have to work at the job.

“Communities”

The third key word is “communities.” What is a community? It is a group of people living in a common area. You cannot have a community with just one person. A community implies people who are “together”—they live together, work together, play together and solve problems together. It is impossible to build peace unless it is done together.

We have a proverb in my country that says, “It takes two to tango.” The “tango” was a famous Latin American dance that requires two people. Sometimes this proverb is used to mean it takes two people to fight or quarrel. You do not fight by yourself. In addition, it will take at least two people to bring about peace. There is no such thing as a one-sided peace.

I recently read an academic article about trying to establish peace. However, it focused almost entirely on what one side needed to do. Peace will never be established if only one side works at it. It takes the desire and participation of all parties to bring peace. Since establishing and maintaining peace involves many people, there are some implications.

Principles Related to Community

Building community peace always involves compromise.

There is disagreement and conflict and violence because people have different beliefs about something. This is often viewed as an issue of justice or fairness. Let’s take a particular illustration from here in Plateau State.

One group believes only those designated as “indigenes” are entitled to scholarships, awards, appointments and other state privileges. Another group believes anyone who permanently lives in the state and pays taxes in that state should be entitled to all the privileges of citizens of that state. Both sides believe anything other than what they believe is unfair.

However, there is no peace where everyone gets everything they want. Since these two positions are mutually exclusively, if there is going to be some kind of peace about that issue, either one side or the other has to give up their position or there must be some kind of compromise. Peace is always established together.

Building community peace always includes forgiveness.

There are always offenses in any conflict situation. If a disagreement lasts long enough and it is allowed to continue to grow, someone is going to get hurt, certainly emotionally and even physically. There are two ways that we can try to solve the problem.

We can retaliate. Retaliation is an attempt to bring about justice through your own means. In other words, an injustice has been created. The perception is that the government has not or will not do anything about it. Therefore, I will do something to make that person feel the pain of his injustice. We humans have a built-in sense of justice so retaliation is a natural human reaction.

We can forgive. Forgiveness does not ignore the injustice that has been done. However, it deliberately makes a decision that it will not seek any kind of personal retaliation. It releases the offending person from the consequences of his or her harmful decisions.

Both Christianity and Islam teach the importance of forgiveness:

- *you who have believed, indeed, among your spouses and your children are enemies to you, so beware of them. But ...if you pardon and overlook and forgive - then indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful (Qur'an 64:14).*
- *"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." (Luke 6:37).*

I think all of us know that if we continue to retaliate and seek to render justice individually to those who offend us, that is only going to lead to more conflict. However, if we forgive and overlook the fault of others, this will lead to reconciliation and peace. If we continue to insist on retaliation, we are not going to have peace. Therefore, let us forgive one another when we offend each other. Peace will always be achieved together.

Building community peace always includes working together at multi-levels.

- Government must be involved at all levels. We sometimes think that establishing and maintaining peace is the government's responsibility. That is true to a certain extent but government cannot bring about peace by itself.
- NGOs are doing their part. There are many NGOs in Jos and throughout Nigeria committed to peace. Many of these were founded and many are funded by people who are not part of the conflict. If people in the UK or Saudi Arabia can give money for peace purposes, how much more should we who live here be willing to be involved.
- The religious communities must be involved. There are no more influential group of people than the grassroots level religious leaders, the pastors and imams.

- If these people would insist that the worshippers they lead would follow the teachings of their respect religions, that would make peace much easier.
- The village heads and community leaders must be involved.
- Individuals and families must reach out to their friends on the other side.

In the peace work I have done, I have found that the grassroots people are more anxious to establish peace than the big people.

Building community peace always involves patience.

Any time you work with other human beings, they are going to disappoint you. Therefore, you have to be patient with them. Can we be as patient with the “others” as we are with our own people?

Illustration of Working Together

In 1999, I was made aware of a major social problem that was developing in Nigeria that was just as deadly as the various violent conflicts we have experienced in Nigeria. In fact, more people have died from this crisis than in all of the violent conflicts we have experienced in Nigeria in the same period of time, including the Niger-Delta crisis, the Boko Haram insurgency and the so-called farmer-herder conflict. I speak of the silent killer HIV that leads to AIDS. I personally got involved in this crisis in 1999 by helping to create the Faith-Based AIDS Awareness Initiative. When I started the HIV rate in Nigeria was about 1.9 percent of the population between the ages of 15 and 49. By 2006 or so, the rate across the country had risen to 5.6 percent and Plateau State’s rate was even higher. However, there were many people who worked together. The Ministry of Health led the way. The Ministry of Education developed a robust plan. The faith community got involved. Even the unions of truck drivers and organizations associated with prostitutes got involved. And the result is that by March 2019, the HIV prevalence rate had been reduced to 1.4 percent.²The point is this: HIV and AIDS crisis was affecting practically the whole society. Therefore the whole society got involved and there was success.

The issue of violence and conflict has a more direct and immediate effect on us. Therefore, it should be easier to motivate people to work for peace. I challenge all who are here and whatever agencies or organization you represent to make sure that you lead the way in building peace together.

Conclusion

I will conclude this presentation by telling a story about Rev. Sunday Gomna, former pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Anguwan Rimi³ and one of his Muslim neighbors.

From 2001 to 2008, Immanuel Baptist Church was burned three times. During the second crisis, the pastor’s office which he had moved to a safer location was destroyed along with his almost completed MA thesis. Therefore, he and his church have really suffered as a result of these crises.

² UNAIDS Press Release,
https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/pressreleaseandstatementarchive/2019/march/20190314_nigeria
a Accessed 19 September 2020

³ This story was told to me personally by Sunday Gomna who has also read this account to confirm its accuracy.

A couple of years after our first crisis, the Plateau State governor was suspended and an acting governor was installed. This acting governor invited leaders from various communities to meet him and share their observations about the crisis, including the community leaders of the Anguwan Rimi area. Two pastors along with several Muslim elders made up the delegation from that area. When it was Rev. Sunday's turn to speak he said,

Your Excellency, I could tell you about the time my church was burned the first time but I am not going to do that. I could tell you about the time my church was burned the second time but I will not do that either. I will tell you about the time they came to burn my church the third time. When they arrived that time, my Muslim neighbor who lives across the street stopped the boys and said, "You cannot burn this church. This is a house of prayer." When the boys insisted, the old man said, "If you need to burn something, you can burn my house but you cannot burn this church again."

As soon as Rev. Gomna said that, the acting governor stopped him and said, "Who was that man? I want to know his name." His name was supplied.

After the meeting and the delegation was outside, one of the Muslim elders said to Rev. Gomna, "Pastor, why did you do that? We know what you could have said about the loss of your church and your home but why did you choose to say something good about one of our people instead?" Rev. Gomna said:

We are the elders of our community. We do have some problems in our community but we do not really need to disturb the governor with those small things. For example, some of your boys keep coming over to our church, breaking in and stealing our sound equipment. In addition, some come over and defecate on our church property. However, I think we are wise enough to handle those small problems and not worry the governor with those things.

The elders quickly agreed. The following Sunday Pastor Sunday hosted them for a meal in the church. Later, he and these Muslim community leaders worked together to clean up the community and even were able to get a dumpster brought to their community. Not only did they establish peace but they were able to work together to maintain peace and promote development in the community.

Why were these leaders able to be successful?

- Because they were willing to make compromises.
- Because they were willing to forgive one another.
- Because they were willing to work together.
- Because they were willing to be patient with one another.

This is not a story from Pakistan or Sudan or even Kaduna. This pastor and his neighbor and the other community elders were residents of Jos that worked together to restore peace to their community. This is the kind of building peaceful, safer and secure communities in Plateau State that we need.

Today is the day we are peacefully celebrating the 60th anniversary of Nigeria as a nation. I pray that we will return to this place next year at this time and be able to report that we have been even more successful building peaceful, safer and secure communities in Plateau State.