

# Tribal conflict:

## Churches persevere in seeking solutions

By **PHILIP GIBBS**, associate member of the Melanesian Institute in Goroka and research adviser for Caritas in Papua New Guinea

There is a long history of tribal fighting in the Papua New Guinea Highlands. Inter-tribal violence was suppressed during the colonial period through control and the promise of prosperity; however, in recent times tribal conflict seems to be on the increase.

A recent study of tribal fighting in Enga claims that since 1991 there have been 341 tribal wars reported by Enga Village Courts, resulting in a loss of more than 3,800 lives and extensive destruction of property.

The 2002 elections saw high levels of conflict and destruction. The recent 2007 elections, though not as bad, still involved unacceptable levels of violence, and the repercussions continue to be felt.

Many conflicts at other times can be traced back to election related disputes.

Most churches see their mission and ministry as including intervention in tribal conflicts as mediators, peace brokers and peace builders.

Many would see forgiveness, peace and reconciliation and other aspects of human development as a natural outcome of effective evangelization.

Church leaders have been acting as mediators in conflicts and in the establishment of conflict resolution and peace building programs such as *Gutpela Sindaun* of the Catholic Church and *Young Ambassadors for Peace* of the United Church.

Most pastors would regularly condemn violence and promote peaceful behaviour in their teaching and preaching.

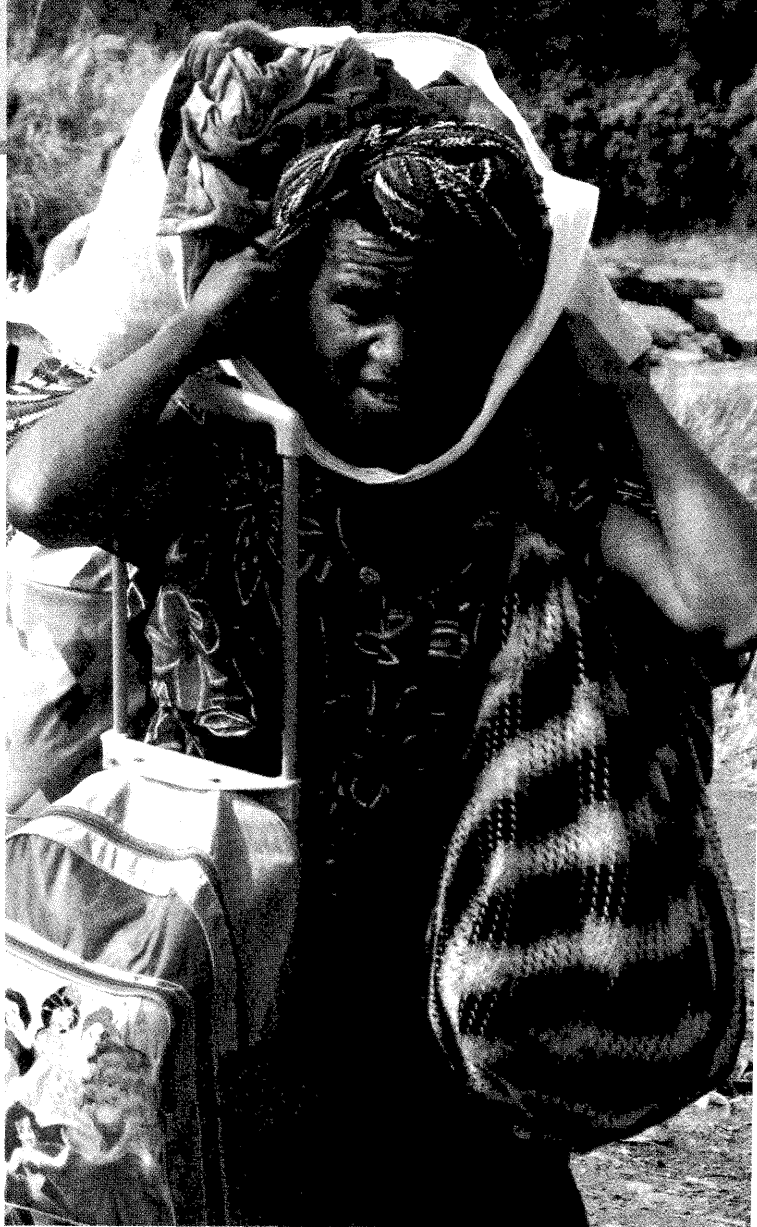
### Peace Bridge

An example of the Christian approach to peace-making may be seen in the "Peace Bridge" in Enga Province.

A few years back there was an extended tribal war between clans near Wapenamanda in Enga Province. The clan of a catechist, Matthew Ima (who sadly has since passed away) was engaged in warfare with a neighbouring clan.

Mathew and his community realised that they had to start at home with a pacification and re-evangelisation of their own clan. So he asked a relative to go secretly and bring back one of the fighting spears from the opposition.

Having obtained one he took it to a public gathering where he publicly cut off the sharp tip announcing that he had "broken Satan's teeth."



Woman fleeing violence during 2007 elections in the Highlands. (Photo: Philip Gibbs)

Subsequently the fighting subsided, but it erupted again the following year. The members of Mathew's God Triwan community felt isolated as the fight raged all around them. To visit other communities would be a very risky proposition.

The leaders of the movement prayed for the fight to finish but it continued. So they felt they had to do something more.

Matthew suggested that they build a bridge across the deep ravine lying between themselves and their enemies. The image of the bridge came from a drawing in an early edition of the Wabag Catholic Diocesan Pastoral Plan.

To build a bridge seemed like a risky idea. It appeared even more foolhardy when Matthew announced that it would be built with a base of stones carried from the river, and that people would carry the stones in silence praying as they did so, and fasting from dawn to dusk.

It was a massive challenge for the small community. They worked together for a full six months.

Meanwhile the tribal war continued nearby, causing the deaths of over 100 people, the God Triwan community fasted,



Before and after... Catholic Church Pina alive in 2006



... and after fighting in 2007. Both sides of the conflict suffered. (Photos: Philip Gibbs)

prayed and carried stones to build up the base of the bridge.

The base, some ten metres across was formed with three tiers of stones, the tiers said to represent God in the past, now and in the future.

They used no cement, but simply fitted the stones together. Eventually the base was formed and high on top of the stone tiers they built a triangular wooden support structure – the triangle representing the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Then vines and saplings were strung across the top.

On their side of the bridge they planted a coffee tree. They would have liked to have planted a grape vine, but there are no grape vines in PNG.

However the coffee tree had much the same symbolic meaning: prosperity and good times. On the “enemy” side they hung a notice reading, “Welcome to the road to Emmaus.”

Despite occasional enemy gunfire, miraculously no one was injured during construction of the “Peace Bridge” and moreover, miraculously the fighting ceased at the time the bridge was completed.

Matthew had a hand in the last stages of ending the fight. Noting where fighter’s supporters would sit on hilltops to observe and direct the fighting, during the cover of darkness, he crossed the bridge to erect a cross on the observation sites.

Those involved in fighting found the presence of the cross unnerving when they came the next day.

Men did much of the physical work in building the bridge. However, women from the community not only helped carry stones, but also contributed in a special way through their “generator teams”.

People note how at dusk, the local mission station appears as an island of light in the darkness after the diesel generator is started.

In an analogous way, “generator teams” are groups of women who pray around the cross to generate “prayer power”.

They see their prayer around the cross as like connecting a power line to God. While they pray, the power is on and they and their community are no longer in darkness subject to the power of Satan or evil Spirits.

They say that their prayer links them to the light of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

The fighting has stopped, and the Peace Bridge was represented in a model replica at a peace ceremony. Nevertheless, there is an ever present danger of violence in other parts of the province.

Members of the God Triwan community were very proud of one of their daughters because in 2003 she completed her studies to become a nurse. However, while standing waiting for a bus in Wabag, she was shot and killed.

People said that it was a case of mistaken identity. They had intended to avenge the death of a man from another tribe. Customarily her murder would have ignited another tribal fight.

However her devout parents and leaders of her community decided not to take revenge. One could give many similar accounts of Christians, and peace-making, particularly in the PNG Highlands. The majority of conflicts in the Highlands are resolved peacefully.

### Peace in Mendi

A few years ago Mendi, in the Southern Highlands, was the scene of a tribal fight that disrupted the life of the town. High-powered guns were used and there were many casualties.

It is said that people living beside the Mendi River feared to wash or collect water after seeing bodies floating down river “as if they were logs”.

The priest from a Catholic parish in Mendi, along with the United Church Bishop, tried ways to intervene. They started at the side, away from the fighting scene, tending to the wounded and the deceased of both sides.

The frequent presence of the two religious men gradually won approval of both sides and they were seen as neutral God’s Men. As trust built up both were able to penetrate deeper into the battle field.

In the meantime the Legion of Mary, composed mostly of women from the Catholic Kumin Cathedral community, visited the scene of the conflict to pray.

Few people joined them at first, but they persisted and the number grew, eventually including some of the fighting men. After many months of fighting the men were becoming hungry and weary.

Then the church responded in public protest as Catholics and United Church leaders, accompanied by other Christians, led a



Reconciliation at peace ceremonies in the Eastern Highlands (Photo: Nelson Kasa)



.... and in Enga.

(Photo: Philip Gibbs)

peace march with a statue of Mary carried in turns by those wanting peace.

Eventually government representatives, church leaders, and members of the Peace Foundation Melanesia -- an NGO open to all but with close ties with the Catholic Church, offered assistance.

They provided training in peace-making skills and restorative justice. Eventually peace was restored.

During the recent 2007 general election, Catholic women, Caritas, and a women's group called 'Meri Kirap Sapotin' voluntarily worked together to conduct awareness on good governance and the Limited Preferential Voting (LPV) system.

They cooperated with different churches, the security forces and the PNGDF chaplain and the 2007 election was accomplished relatively peacefully

### Churches in partnership

In 2004, seven of the major church denominations in PNG formed the PNG Church Partnership Programme (CPP). The group comprises the Anglican, Union Baptist, Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventist and United Churches, which represent over 60% of the Christian population in PNG.

The seven churches are collaborating together to share knowledge, planning, resources and action.

AusAID has recognised the potential of this partnership and provides support through the member churches agencies in Australia.

An important part of that collaboration is in the area of peace-building. The CPP has undertaken a number of peace building projects, for example, a peace building workshops with Caritas PNG, and conflict resolution skills training with the Baptist Union and the Salvation Army.

Recently CPP commissioned a study of the churches' involvement in peace-building in the Highlands during the 2007 election period.

### Churches and peace-building

In referring to "Churches" and Peace Building, what do we mean by "Church"? Are we referring to institutions or to people? In fact it is both.

If one considers church as a community, or "communion", the emphasis is not on office or authority or hierarchical structure, but on the community of faith-filled people. Hence, when referring to the "Church" being involved in peace building we can think of the church as an institution independent of the Government or other interest groups.

The ecclesia, or community of God, tries to do for men and women here and now, what Jesus did in his time: reconciling people with God and one another and providing them with new hope for the future.

Life can become complicated. As a community of people we may see fighting groups as members of churches also. Former friends, neighbours, and members of the same church may end up on different sides of tribal conflict.

Thus the "Church" may not be independent in a situation of conflict, and at times, unfortunately, warring tribes identify with different churches and church property is destroyed.

What do we mean by "peace"?

A young man from Mt Hagen says, "Peace means having a good social relationship with community members. There is no stealing of people's property, no domestic violence, no land disputes, etc.

The statement typifies how peace is seen from the "grassroots" level in the Highlands.

In people's life experience it means that they have freedom of movement and time and energy to focus on achieving gutpela sindaun.

From a church perspective, gutpela sindaun or well-being also reflects "God's peace."

### Not just talk

When churches go into peace work, it is not simply a matter of talking. As may be seen in the examples given above from Enga and Mendi, churches like to use symbols as means of communication.

The cross is obviously an important symbol. This has been central with the God Triwan movement in Enga and the Cross of Peace movement in the Western Highlands.

A decorated statue of Mary was a central symbol used in a reconciliation ceremony between two clans at the Catholic Church in Par, Enga.



Carrying rocks for peace bridge, Enga. (Photo: Philip Gibbs)

In Simbu, Catholics sprinkled holy water on a battlefield.

In Lumusa, the fight between two clans was resolved ritually by the confession of sin, public reconciliation ceremonies and signed village court agreements.

In the Eastern Highlands the Seventh Day Adventist church uses flags on territorial borders and in battle fields as a symbol of peace to deter warriors going through these areas with guns.

Later, flags were returned, not in secret, but in a public ceremony. Bibles may be exchanged in conjunction with a tradition brukim suga ceremony (literally – to break sugarcane – and drink the sweet juice together).

Church members also place importance on prayer and fasting as a way of gaining divine endorsement for their work. Continuous intercessory prayer is often an integral part of the Churches' intervention.

Catholics, Lutherans, Christian Life Centre, and Jesus life Centre members all fasted and prayed for a resolution of conflict in Simbu.

"Prayer warriors" in Lumusa on the border of Enga and the Western Highlands have been meeting on the first Tuesday of the month for the past nine years to pray for peace.

In some cases there were occasions providing an opportunity for a radical change of heart of warriors and gunmen.

One of the leaders of the Cross of Peace movement in the Western Highlands tells how when they carried the cross into one community, the young men threw their guns to the old men and leaders telling them to go to war.

One "gunman" or leading warrior in the tribe as he threw away his gun said that he was tired of killing. This is not an isolated case.

### Strategies of the churches

In their peace-making efforts churches stress the importance of good leadership both within churches and within civil society.

Those occasions where church leaders were involved were especially powerful, for example Archbishop Meier's role in the Cross of Peace

brokered Ulga Ukupa/Kulka peace ceremony; and the role of Bishop Reichert (Catholic) and Kabali (United) in the Mendi reconciliation.

Sometimes when two clans or tribes were preparing to fight responsible leaders and elders from the neighbouring clans will meet and quickly try to stop the fight.

They will cut tree branches and place the branches across the area where the fight is going to happen.

Then they will gather there and when the opponents came to fight, the neutral parties negotiate with the opponents to find a resolution to the conflict.

Churches and church leaders often have authority because they live with the people and understand them. Police and government appointed peace mediators come to do their job, but then leave and return to live elsewhere.

Church leaders on the other hand are often part of the community where the trouble lies. They usually know the history of the conflict, have a sense of the issues involved, and will be around for follow-up. They also have a capacity to motivate people to work together towards a goal without financial reward.

The special role of women should not be overlooked. They exercise their own special form of leadership, as in the "generator teams" in Enga, and in the prayer groups and in public marches in Mendi.

Perseverance in the face of initial hostility is another important quality in peace-making.

In a number of cases, first approaches by church members may appear to be a failure. They will face open hostility, or no one will show up to an event. Fighters will pour scorn on them asking -- what would they know about tribal fighting!

In one conflict in the Eastern Highlands, when fighting continued despite efforts to stop them, the provincial government told the people that they were finished with them: "You started the fight, now you finish it yourselves."

The area was declared a war zone and even police did not go there. Nevertheless, the church continued to work for peace behind the scenes.

Often it involves dealing not only with obvious causes, but with long-term social factors also.

A parish priest in Simbu visited fighting areas bringing vegetable seeds to encourage people to replant their gardens. Once he realised that drugs were involved, he conducted a drug rehabilitation in-service and the parish peace and justice co-ordinator would visit those recovering from drug use and lead them in peace mediation talks.

Inter tribal conflict develops following certain patterns. Trained peace makers can be ready to intervene when war weariness sets in.

This happened in Mendi and also in an intervention by the Seventh Day Adventist church in the Eastern Highlands.

After a round table discussion arranged by the church, people expressed sentiments such as, "We have been fugitives in our own lands", "We want to live normal lives", and "We want services to come back and schools, hospitals, markets to reopen." What they felt after the cease-fire was something they had been missing for the last ten years.

Skills training are seen as important. For example, without proper awareness and monitoring warring groups might use a cease fire for replenishment of supplies and ammunition as happened in some of the conflicts in Simbu.

Groups specialising in skills training include the Peace Foundation Melanesia, and the Young Ambassadors for Peace (YAP) in Tari (SHP).

YAP has close links with the United Church, but is interdenominational and inter-faith, including both Christians and Muslims. As one of their leaders says, "Peace is for everybody."

In preparation for the elections, at the beginning of 2007, the Justice and Peace agency of the Catholic Diocese of Kundiawa conducted a two week long Peace Building and Integral Human Development training for parish coordinators at the Mingende Pastoral Centre.

The Yakani tribe near Wabag in Enga, supported by churches in the area, has formed the Yakani Tambukini Gutpela Sindaun Movement.

The nine laws of the movement include "no inter clan fighting," "No murder or assault of any person by an outsider or by a member of the community," and "No harbouring of wanted criminals."

There are other Highlands communities in various parts of the Highlands (at Kup in the WHP for example) taking a similar stand with community laws and standards for peace, self governance and self reliance.

## Challenges

Despite the important work being done by the churches, as illustrated above, there are still many problems and concerns.

The whole culture of violence of which tribal conflict is only a part still needs to be addressed.

In such a culture people turn quickly to violence to try to solve problems. Road blocks are used as an extortion tactic. The role of guns is a big challenge. Church pastors have been shot, and now it seems that in many places tribal fighters have the same or better weapons than the police.

A fatalistic "don't care" attitude seems to be present in many cases. Church groups are trying to confront this, but there is still



Peace bridge, Enga. (Photo: Philip Gibbs)

much to be learned as to how best to deal with this attitudinal problem.

It is important to work side by side with government but without being co-opted, and without the churches losing their independence and prophetic stance.

The churches need a common standard as to how best to cooperate with government lest they be used for other purposes, especially now when some politicians promise ten percent of expenditure to the churches.

They also need to address the issue of payment of school subsidies and other forms of "pork barrelling" etc. right at election time. Churches can get sucked into this because they do not want to miss out on what is rightfully theirs as citizens.

Greater co-operation between the churches is also a challenge.

There are many cases of churches working together in peace-making, for example in Mendi or in the Kainantu area of the Eastern Highlands, where when a person was killed or gravely wounded, SDA church members would run onto the battle field with their flag and carry the body out to the road from where the Salvation Army would provide an ambulance to take the body to the hospital.

However, there are also tragic examples of where church grounds have become battle fields and examples of enmity between tribal groups split along denominational lines.

The security forces played an important role in maintaining control in the Highlands during the 2007 general election.

However, their time is limited, and often tribal conflicts erupt in the post-election period after the security forces have left.

This is an area where the churches are playing an essential role in peace-building today, particularly in the highlands.

Churches need to gain respect within the communities and civil society during the period between elections. It is useless looking for respect in the heat of an election if it has not been developed before that time.