

**Address to the E.H. Johnson Award Luncheon
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Recipient of the 2007 E. H. Johnson Award
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When the Organization of African Unity transformed itself into the African Union in 1999, the compelling phrase that African diplomats used to describe one of the central changes would have meant a great deal to Ted Johnson. They described Africa as moving from a collective policy of non-interference to one of non-indifference. Part of my preparation for today was to read Hugh McCullum's fine account in the Presbyterian Record (2004) of Ted Johnson's efforts in Jointchurchaid and Canairelief in the Biafra campaign – a heroic attempt to implement a policy of non-indifference if ever there was one.

One of the most chilling of human experiences is to encounter the unqualified despair that flows from official indifference. It is the crushing defeat of hope that can be heard in the voices and seen in the eyes of people in desperate circumstances when they allow themselves to talk about the overwhelming feeling of having been abandoned by a world that is indifferent to their plight. It is a moment that exposes a depth of spiritual and psychological barrenness that overshadows even the most extreme and obvious of physical deprivations.

One such encounter came to me on a visit to the Western Upper Nile region of southern Sudan during the north-south civil war. It is an oil region and as such was the scene of perpetual instability and frequently intense fighting during the war. I remember in particular a visit to the village of Ler. It included all the dramatics that accompany a furtive landing in a conflict zone on a remote grass landing strip, but the walk around the settlement revealed another kind of human drama. The village had swollen into an IDP camp of several tens of thousands of people squatting on a small patch of higher ground in the region's famous swamplands. The people had fled a rash of fighting and now sought temporary respite from the never ending civil war; but it was no refuge. UN food relief flights had been cut in the unrealistic hope that it would encourage planting for the next crop cycle. So there was nothing – no food, not even tea bags. The local pastor, a Presbyterian since Ler is in the Nuer/Presbyterian region of the south, apologized for not being able to invite his unexpected guests to tea.

The discussions, with group after group of these internal refugees, focused on why the world was allowing this extraordinary and brutal war to carry on for decades, on why the millions of people it left homeless and destitute were of no apparent concern to the rest of the world. One articulate young man asked me about the proposal for a no-fly zone. It was then a prominent demand internationally because the Khartoum government was deliberately bombing communities, including IDP camps, simply to keep the population unstable and in flight. I had to explain why that kind of help was unlikely to come. The Security Council was irreparably divided, with the oil interests of the Chinese very much in play. Khartoum was also being courted by the Americans to come onside in the war on terror (Osama bin Laden was once hosted there). Well, asked the young man, then what about Canada? All I could offer was more of the same, and so I began to explain that this was not the kind of initiative that Canada was likely to lead, not something in fact that any one country could do on its own. The desolation in his eyes as he turned to walk away haunts me in a more visceral and immediate way than do the scenes of the inhuman physical hardship and deprivation that we have all encountered too many times. The reality of utter abandonment was something that E.H. Johnson knew very well – and he refused to tolerate it.

It would be easy to underestimate the depth of commitment and single-mindedness it took to mount the Biafran relief effort of non-indifference. The political/moral imperatives of the intervention were far from clear. There is no doubt that the churches' relief effort saved many, many lives, but that didn't mean it was a universally popular campaign or that there were not strong and morally compelling challenges to the effort. Larger issues were thought to be at stake – like the sovereignty of newly independent African states and the political stability of Africa. And to be fair to the critics of Ted Johnson and his church colleagues, there was also a genuine fear that the church relief effort would serve to prolong a war in which the only realistic outcome was the defeat and rejection of Biafra.

I was privileged to meet Ted Johnson a couple of times, and I can envision him responding to the doubters with his “unshakeable belief,” as McCullum puts it, “that to be Christian, to be the church, is ‘to serve humanity in concrete actions, to feed the hungry and to promote justice and peace. ‘That is how,’ he said, ‘the real nature of the church became known in the world.’”

It is fitting and energizing for you to honour the extraordinary work of Ted Johnson. And for me to be acknowledged and supported in the name of that extraordinary Canadian is a truly special thing. And then when I consider the list of extraordinary recipients that have been so honored to date, I'm drawn to the words of the Rev. John L. Bell, the 1999 recipient of the E.H. Johnson award: “...when I looked at the list of my distinguished precursors, I could see clearly why they were given the award, but I couldn't fathom why I should be a recipient.”

Well, that rang true for me, but, of course, when you are chosen for special recognition there is a tendency to go to considerable lengths, sometimes with embarrassing haste, to make sure your modesty doesn't really get in the way of a wonderful occasion. And so, I've again gone to the Rev. Bell for guidance on coming to terms with this extraordinary honour. His specialty was worship and music, and so he put it this way: “If in any way my being here signifies the importance of worship, and more specifically hymnody in the work of Christian mission and the life of the church, then my colleagues and I would want to applaud that trust less timorously than we accept this award.”

So, let me put it this way, if in any way my being here signifies the importance to mission and the life of the church of engaging with public policy questions of violent conflict and peace, then I want to enthusiastically applaud that affirmation, even though it is appropriate to be rather more timorous about the personal acceptance of the award.

It is indeed a great honor. I want to say a bit more about the engagement of the church in security policy and practice, but not before extending my deep appreciation to all of you, to The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and especially to the Committee of the Dr. E.H. Johnson Memorial Fund. It is of high importance that you annually create an occasion to celebrate Ted Johnson's “cutting edge of mission” and to nurture the church and the ecumenical community by lifting up the many ways and places that the mission of the church is carried out – that is, in the ways that humanity is served in concrete actions.

It is also an occasion to honour the local and international work of The Presbyterian Church in Canada in peace-making, and to thank you for your long-term support of Project Ploughshares and for the opportunity to work in collaboration with you through your wonderful staff.

It wasn't until 2005 that the United Nations finally endorsed the kind of action that Jointchurchaid was engaged in 35 years ago – namely, directly violating state sovereignty in the name of protecting

vulnerable people. The Responsibility to Protect policy or doctrine, as articulated in the UN Summit document, confirms that the primary responsibility to protect people rests with states in their own jurisdictions, but when they fail, the international community “has the responsibility to use appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means, in accordance with Chapters VI and VII of the Charter (without consent of the state in question), to help to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity” [para 139]. I’m pleased that your General Assembly is embarking on an R2P study, and when you do study it you will have the experience of Ted Johnson and the Canairelief experience to draw on. The doctrine also goes on to say that the Security Council will consider action through the Chapter VII authority to resort to collective force “should peaceful means be inadequate.” And that of course is what the Security Council is manifestly failing to do today in places like Darfur, Somalia, DRC, and Northern Uganda.

Despite the failure of implementation, R2P policy is an attempt to set conditions to prevent another Biafra – that is, to preclude the indifference of the world to the deliberate use of the suffering of people as a war tactic. It is the idea that the framework of analysis and action actually can be the needs of those in peril, rather than the interests of those who wield power; the idea that sovereignty is not a legitimate barrier to access to people in extreme peril; the idea that the international community will not consign people in places like southern Sudan to the utter and inconsolable despair of persistent abandonment.

I was pleased to participate in the World Council of Churches study (and the 2006 decision) through which the international ecumenical community endorsed R2P. And in affirming the responsibility to protect, churches said they are not prepared to say that it is never appropriate or never necessary to resort to the use of lethal force for the protection of the vulnerable. The resort to force is first and foremost the result of the failure to prevent what could have been prevented with the appropriate foresight and actions. But having failed, and having acknowledged such failure, the world needs to do what it can to limit the burden and peril that is experienced by people as a consequence. Just as individuals and communities in stable and affluent societies are able in emergencies to call on armed police to come to their aid, churches recognize that people in much more perilous circumstances should have access to protectors. Churches are thus not prepared to say that armed force can never be effective in bringing at least a short-term reprieve or protection.

So how does a commitment to non-indifference, even to the point of the resort to force, guide our understanding of Canada’s role in Afghanistan? Basic principles and national values were heavily conflicted in the context of Biafra, and they are no less with regard to Afghanistan today.

In the deeply disturbing days after September 11, 2001 the dominant refrain was that the menace had arrived on our shores and we in North America would now all have to rise to the challenge and defend “our way of life.” But the early message of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien was different. “Let our actions be guided,” he said, “...by our values and our way of life....[L]et us never, ever, forget who we are and what we stand for.” The focus, in other words, was less on “defending” our way of life and more on “depending” on it.

But of course, that was not the prevailing mood. Instead, Washington adopted the mantra that on 9/11 “everything changed” – and because “everything changed,” how could we depend on the old civil values and standards? The insistence that we were in extraordinary times fed the view that extraordinary measures were now required, that we should not be constrained or inhibited by the rules and values, the moral and political rudders, that guide us in normal times. A new security environment meant new

tools. And we soon saw a surfeit of innovative tools that turned out to be rather old and familiar: arrests without trial, security certificate detentions, violations of privacy through wiretap programs, illegal deportations, abuses of prisoners, and of course renewed warfare.

And it was especially and depressingly ironic that these actions, including new wars, follow more than a decade of lessons learned about what does and doesn't work when trying to reverse state failure, build sustainable societies, and prevent violent conflict – in other words, the lessons of peace-building. The basic understanding that had emerged out of the peace-building decade that followed the end of the Cold War was that to prevent violent conflict it was necessary to focus on building conditions in which the local population could see evidence of positive change. Elections, as a means of demonstrating a commitment to political inclusiveness and power sharing, were an important component, but by no means the central strategy.

Inclusiveness had to be part of a much larger strategy: building local security institutions, like the police and judiciary, that were experienced by the people as fair and operating in the interests of all; building an infrastructure of basic services, notably humanitarian relief to the most stricken populations, as well as education and health care, transport and communication; the demobilization and disarming of combatants to give the civilian population the assurance of a serious effort to control crime and sectarian violence; and the start of economic development measures.

On the role of force in extraordinary crises, the report of the Canadian-sponsored report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, in its articulation of the “Responsibility to Protect” doctrine (which as I mentioned was later adopted by the UN and the WCC), made a brief but explicit point about restraint in the use of force. Winning the acceptance of civilian populations, says the report, “means accepting limitations and demonstrating through the use of restraint that the [military] operation is not a war to defeat a state but an operation to protect populations in that state from being harassed, persecuted or killed.”

So, how well have these lessons about multidimensional peace-building and the limits to force in protecting the vulnerable people been applied in Afghanistan? The fact of failure is not itself conclusive evidence of the futility of the effort. The real surprise would be if recovery from decades of war were accomplished without a hitch in a matter of a few years. At the same time, however, the evidence is that the operations of the International Security Assistance Force, including the provincial reconstruction teams, have met with a steady decline in the south in support for both the Afghan Government and the foreign forces that support it. The problem is not so much the absence of peace-building efforts (reconstruction efforts designed to win hearts and minds), as the failure to create a political context that the people of the south regard as their own. As a result, the military operation has become an effort to militarily impose order – despite the fact that all the key players from NATO, to President Karzai, to Gen. Hillier, insist that peace will not be won militarily in Afghanistan.

Current stabilization efforts in the south are premised on reinforcing the current political order that southerners fundamentally distrust and reject. For foreign military stabilization forces to be successful, the key players have to want peace more than war. But if significant stakeholders believe that peace will leave them indefinitely marginalized, they will prefer war to peace. By all accounts, key and fundamental rifts in Afghan society were not healed by the Bonn peace process, leaving only isolated Taliban and al Qaeda spoilers to contend with. Rather substantial elements of the population in the south still regard the Afghan government that Canadian forces are supporting as hostile to their interests.

That suggests opening the political process to renewed negotiations to bring dissident communities and regions into the political and governance process. Calls by Canadians for talks by the Government of Afghanistan and its international backers with the resisters recognize that rebuilding a country and restoring the legitimacy and effectiveness of the central government and its backers is not simply a matter of more effective fighting or even more effective reconstruction projects. It also depends on a commitment to political inclusiveness that reaches out to those now in opposition to the government. Winning the peace is fundamentally a political challenge, not a military one.

A prerequisite to peace is that Afghans become persuaded that their government has the interests of all Afghans at heart. And if Canada aspires, as Mr. Harper has said, to be a serious player on the global stage, then it should build on the extraordinary effort and sacrifice that this country has already made in Afghanistan to be at the forefront of proposing renewed peace efforts to engage politically with those political-military entities that are now in conflict with the government and that represent genuine grievances and aspirations of Afghans.

I must return to the scene of overwhelming despair in southern Sudan. I don't know the fate of the people stranded and abandoned in the IDP camp in Ler, but I do know that when we reported their plight to the New Sudan Council of Churches there was serious follow-up with the UN's World Food Program. The plight of people in that region has now happily improved. There is a long, long way to go, but the foundations for hope are now being set – and to endure they have to be set in the kind of action that Dr. E.H. Johnson would remind us is the cutting edge of mission. It is a mission confirmed in a lovely passage in Isaiah (58: 1 -12) where the prophet rejects fasting that had turned into symbolic and ostentatious displays of temporary self-denial that changed nothing. Thus he redefines fasting as the discipline of pursuing justice:

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free...?"

Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe him...?"

And if that is your fasting, the Prophet says, then...

"...you will be called [the] Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings."

These days we call that kind of thing post-conflict peace-building. And the point is that to see possibility, that is, to find hope in the midst of apparently justified despair, requires action – the active pursuit of possibility, despite the odds. Or, as Ted Johnson might have put it, serving humanity in concrete action is how the church makes the Gospel of hope known in the world.