

ISSN 0218-0812

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ASIA JOURNAL OF
THEOLOGY

Volume 34 Number 2, October 2020

ATESEA | BTESSC

Christian Involvement in Peacebuilding in North East India: A Historical Perspective

Elungkiebe ZELIANG
Martin Luther Christian University, India

Abstract

North East India (NEI) has experienced several violent ethnic conflicts over the past few decades. Ethnic identity claims of rightful ownership of land and assertion of political rights are the common driving causes for the violent conflicts in the region. Sadly, some of the ethnic conflicts were conflicts between Christians of different ethnic groups. In most of the conflicts, Christians became involved to de-escalate the tension, to resolve the conflicts in a peaceful manner, and to promote peaceful coexistence with one another. This essay examines some of the Christian peacebuilding initiatives in the region.

Keywords

peacebuilding, mediation, North East India, fasting and prayer, love feast, humanitarian services, peace seminars

INTRODUCTION

Peace and conflict are part and parcel of life in a society. While peace is the expected norm in a society, it is frequently disrupted by conflicts. Conflict is “a clash between antithetical ideas or interests—within a person or involving two or more persons, groups or states pursuing mutually incompatible goals.”¹ A conflict can occur at many levels, such as intrapersonal, interpersonal, societal, national, and even on the international level. While not all conflicts lead to violence, serious conflicts often cause violence and even devastating war. The term “peace,” derived

¹ Berghof Foundation, *Berghof Glossary on Conflict Transformation* (Berlin: Berghof Foundation Operations, 2012), 10.

from the Latin *pax*, is defined as the state of being calm or quiet, living in friendship with others, or a situation without violence or war.² Johan Galtung, popularly known as the father of peace studies, has classified peace into two categories: negative peace and positive peace. While negative peace is the absence of violence and war, positive peace is the presence of justice and harmonious relationship in society.³ In this essay, the term "peace" refers to the absence of violent conflicts and the presence of harmony in society. Peace is a continuous process that works in a cycle of conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and sustenance of peace in society. The term "peacebuilding" is used here as an all-embracing term referring to conflict prevention, de-escalation of tension and violence, and building peace in post-conflict societies. North East India (NEI) experienced several violent conflicts in the past few decades. In most of the conflicts, Christians in the region became actively involved in peacebuilding mission in the region. Using analytical historical methodology, this essay examines the Christian involvement in peacebuilding in the region.

OVERVIEW OF CONFLICTS IN NORTH EAST INDIA

North East India (NEI) comprises eight states, namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. It has a geographical area of 262,179 km² (101,228 m²), or about 8 percent of the country's land.⁴ The region is connected with the rest of India through the narrow (about 22 km wide) Siliguri corridor of West Bengal. It shares an international boundary of 5,182 km (3,220 m) with the neighboring countries: Tibet and China in the north, Myanmar in the east, Bhutan in the northwest, Nepal in the west, and Bangladesh in the southwest.⁵ According to the 2011 census, the region has a population

- 2 A.S. Hornby, ed., *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, 7th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1114.
- 3 Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167-191.
- 4 Moirangthem Prakash Singh, comp., *Basic Statistics of North Eastern Region 2015* (Shillong: North Eastern Council Secretariat, 2015).
- 5 J.K. Gogoi, H. Goswami, and K.C. Borah, "Problems of Border Areas in North East India: Implications for the Thirteenth Finance Commission" (Dibrugarh: Department of Economics, Dibrugarh University, 2009), 1. <http://fincomindia>.

of 45.58 million, comprising scheduled tribes, scheduled castes,⁶ and the general population.⁷

NEI is inhabited by people of different genetic stocks, including Australoid, Caucasoid, and Indo-Mongoloid peoples. There are over 220 ethnic groups living in the region, of which the Bodos are the largest indigenous ethnic group.⁸ Each ethnic group or tribe has its own distinct language, culture, and traditions. While most of the ethnic groups follow a patriarchal social system, the Garo, Jaintia, and Khasi tribes of Meghalaya practice a matrilineal system.⁹ In the patriarchal society the lineage is passed down through the sons, and the ancestral property is inherited by the male heir. In the matrilineal society, however, the lineage is passed down through the daughter, and the youngest daughter becomes the custodian of the ancestral clan property.¹⁰ While people in the plains practiced Hinduism, traditionally the tribals in the hills practiced their indigenous/ primal religions. The introduction of British colonial rule in the nineteenth century,¹¹ the advent and spread of Christianity and of Western education during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought about tremendous changes in the life of the people in the region.¹² In the course of time,

nic.in/writereaddata/html_en_files/oldcommission_html/fincom13/discussion/report14.pdf.

- 6 For explanations of these terms, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scheduled_Castes_and_Scheduled_Tribes.
- 7 <http://www.census2011.co.in:80/states.php>; Singh, *Basic Statistics of North Eastern Region 2015*, xxvii.
- 8 B.M. Reddy et al., *Austro-Asiatic Tribes of Northeast India Provide Hitherto Missing Genetic Link between South and Southeast Asia*, PLoS ONE 2, no. 11 (2007).
- 9 Milton Sangma, "History and Culture of the Garos," in *Garo Hills Land and the People*, ed. L.S. Gassah (Gauhati/New Delhi: Omsons Publications, 1984), 138 [121-144]; O.L. Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change in Northeast India* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1993), 33-34.
- 10 Julius Marak, *Garo Customary Laws and Practices: A Sociological Study* (Kolkata: Firma KLM Private Limited, 2002), 135-156.
- 11 A. Mackenzie, *The North-East Frontier of India*, (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2017); Robert Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam: 1883-1941* (Delhi: Eastern Publishing House, 1983).
- 12 H.K. Barpujari, *The American Missionaries and North-East India: 1836-1900* (Guwahati: Spectrum, 1986); F.S. Downs, *History of Christianity in India: North East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Bangalore: Church History Association of India, 1992); J. Puthenpurakal, ed., *Impact of Christianity on North East India* (Shillong:

most of the tribes in the hills have become Christian while most people in the plains remain Hindu, and others follow other religions, such as Islam, Buddhism, and primal or traditional religions.

The colonial rule and the Christian missionaries created a sense of ethnic identity among the people based on historical and linguistic lines. While the government placed the same ethnic groups, as far as possible, under the same administrative units, the missionaries helped the ethnic groups to form Christian organizations usually on ethnic lines.¹³ Owing to the multiple ethnic differences, unity has been always a challenge for the people in NEI. Being lovers of independent life, the people of NEI even resisted the British colonial power in several places and at several times. For instance, the people of Khonoma fought against the British in 1879;¹⁴ the Kukis fought the British in 1917-1919; the Zeliangrongs rebelled against the British under Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu between 1925 and 1932, and so forth.¹⁵ The history of the Naga political struggle is traced back to the formation in 1918 of the Naga Club, which submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1929. The Naga struggle for political independence, however, intensified with the formation of the Naga National Council (NNC) in February 1946, which continues to this day.¹⁶ In the course of time, many political groups emerged in different states of the region. Due to the political troubles, the region has often been referred to as a "disturbed area."¹⁷ Unfortunately, the underground political factions often fight with one another, causing tension and even leading to violent conflicts.

In recent decades, the people in NEI experienced several ethnic conflicts. The main reasons are land disputes, ethnicity, and political rights. These

Vendrame Institute Publications, 1996).

- 13 Frederick S. Downs, *The Mighty Works of God*, rev. ed. (Guwahati: Christian Literature Centres, 2014), 96-154.
- 14 Piketo Sema, *British Policy and Administration in Nagaland 1881-1947* (New Delhi: Scholar Publishing House, 1992), 19-20.
- 15 Asoso Yonuo, *Nagas Struggle against the British Rule under Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu 1925-1947* (Kohima: Leno Printing Press, 1982); Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam*, 85-87.
- 16 Lanunungsang Ao, *From Phizo to Muivah: The Naga National Question in North East India* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2002).
- 17 R. Kumar and S. Ram, *Encyclopaedia of North-East India: Violence and Terrorism in North-East India*, vol. 6 (New Delhi: Arpan Publications, 2013), 103-104.

are the main reasons for the endless cycle of conflicts. For instance, the Kuki-Naga conflict occurred in Manipur during 1992-1998;¹⁸ the Meiteis (Hindus) and Pangal (Muslims) clashed in Manipur in 1993; the Kuki-Paite clashed in Manipur during 1997-1998;¹⁹ the Bodo-Adivasi clashed in Assam in 1996 and 1998;²⁰ the Bru-Mizo conflict and repatriation in Mizoram occurred between 1997 and 2009;²¹ the Dimasa-Hmar conflict in Assam in 2003; the Karbi-Kuki conflict in Karbi Anglong District, Assam, during 2004-2005;²² the Dimasa-Karbi clashed in Karbi Anglong District, Assam, in 2005; the Dimasa-Zeme Naga clashed in Dima Hasao District, Assam, in 2009; the Rabha-Garo conflict in Assam in 2011;²³ the Meitei-Naga conflict in Manipur in 2015; and the Chang-Yimchungru conflict in Tuensang District, Nagaland, in 2015.²⁴ All these ethnic conflicts were serious and violent, with many casualties, painful suffering, and huge economic losses. Regrettably, Christians played active parts in most of these conflicts while some became victims. In the midst of such violent conflicts, however, Christian organizations played important roles to prevent and de-escalate the tension and violence and to reconcile the conflicting parties.

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- 18 Nehginpao Kipgen, "Ethnic Conflict in India: A Case Study of the Kukis and the Nagas in Manipur," *Indian Journal of Political Science* 72, no. 4 (October-December 2011): 1043-1060; Mangkhosat Kipgen, "Manipur Baptist Convention's Involvement in Peacebuilding Work," in *Peacemaking in North East India: Social and Theological Exploration*, ed. Yangkahao Vashum and Woba James (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, ETC, 2012), 84-98.
- 19 Rebecca C. Haokip, "The Kuki-Paite Conflict in the Churachandpur District of Manipur," in *Conflict Mapping and Peace Processes in Northeast India*, ed. Lazar Jeyaseelan (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2008), 185-208.
- 20 Walter Fernandes et al., *Living with Conflicts* (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2018), 21-41.
- 21 Fernandes et al., *Living with Conflicts*, 93-118.
- 22 Joseph Damzen, "Response of the Youth to the Karbi-Kuki Conflict in Karbi Anglong," in *Conflict Mapping and Peace Processes in Northeast India*, ed. Lazar Jeyaseelan (Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2008), 54-93.
- 23 Chuchengfa Gogoi, "Competing Claims in Border Areas: A Case Study of the Ethnic Conflict between Garo and Rabha in Goalpara District, Assam," in *History, Polity and Environment in India*, ed. Bipul Handique and Pallash Chetia (2018), 51-64.
- 24 Fernandes et al., *Living with Conflicts*, 72-92.

CHRISTIAN INVOLVEMENT IN PEACEBUILDING IN NORTH EAST INDIA

Jeffrey Haynes writes that religion can both encourage conflict and build peace. He argues that "religious individuals and faith-based organizations, as carriers of religious ideas, can play important roles, not only as a source of conflict but also as a tool for conflict resolution and peace-building, providing early warnings of conflict, good offices once conflict has erupted, and contributing to advocacy, mediation and reconciliation."²⁵ In most of the conflicts mentioned above, Christians have been actively involved in de-escalating the tension and restoring peace and harmony in society. Some of the major Christian peacebuilding initiatives include the following.

Fasting and Prayer

Prayer is an important and common practice in Christianity. Christians pray for different purposes: for thanksgiving, spiritual strength, healing from sickness, daily needs, divine guidance, wisdom, peace, and so forth. Christians believe that God is the source of peace and that he gives peace to the people (Lv 26:6a). When the lives of the Jews were under threat during the reign of King Ahasuerus of Persia in the 5th century BC, the Jews in Susa, the Persian capital, fasted and prayed for three days (Est 4:16-17) and the Jews were saved (Est 7-8). As such, whenever Christians are confronted with conflicts or violence, they fast and pray individually and corporately for peace and harmony. For instance, during the Kuki-Naga ethnic conflict in the 1990s in Manipur, the Manipur Baptist Convention Peace Committee (MBCPC) appealed to all the local churches to observe fasting and prayer for peace in the state. Accordingly, local churches observed fasting and prayer for restoration of peace and harmony in the state.²⁶ In 1994, Dr. Denton Lotz, then the General Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, initiated prayer retreat programs and the MBC secretaries continued to organize such programs for several years. In 2000, the then General Secretary of the MBC, Rev. S.K. Hokey, reported that the MBC

25 Jeffrey Haynes, "Conflict, Conflict Resolution and Peace-Building: The Role of Religion in Mozambique, Nigeria and Cambodia," in *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 47, no. 1 (2009): 52-75. DOI: 10.1080/14662040802659033.

26 Elungkiebe Zeliang, *A History of the Manipur Baptist Convention* (Imphal: Manipur Baptist Convention, 2005), 66.

conducted "42 monthly Prayer Retreats till 2000," which were mostly held in the Kuki and Naga churches.²⁷ Concerning the prayer retreats, Rev. Hokey observed: "The attitude of many people who joined our prayer meetings changed and many people committed themselves to pray for the ethnic conflict and opted for peace. Prayer is one of our weapons and we believed that God works miracles through prayers."²⁸ Likewise, during the Chang-Yimchungru conflict in Tuensang District, Nagaland, in 2015, the church leaders of the two tribes appealed to their respective churches and the latter conducted fasting and prayer meetings on the same day, sharing the same prayer points.²⁹ When serious tension arose between Peren and Tesen villages over a land dispute in January 2016, Izieteilung Terieng, Executive Secretary of the Zeme Baptist Church Council (ZBCC) in Peren, Nagaland, sent a message to all the pastors under the ZBCC to pray for peace between the two villages.³⁰ These are just few examples of fasting and prayer for peace observed by Christians in conflict situations. Fasting and prayers are not only a spiritual petition for God's intervention but also a demonstration of the commitment to and longing for peace in society. As fasting and prayer programs are community affairs, they also create a sense of respect for the community decision to refrain from violence and resolve the conflict in a peaceful manner. In this way, Christian peace initiatives in the form of fasting and prayers help to de-escalate tension and restore peace and harmony in society.

Pulpit Exchange Ministry

When both the conflicting parties are either Christians or Christian dominated, Christian organizations often try to bring the conflicting parties together for prayer and worship and to initiate a local peace process. At times they organize pulpit exchange ministry between Christian leaders from the conflicting parties. For example, on July 7, 1996, the MBCPC organized combined Christian worship services of Kukis and Nagas in ten

27 Kipgen, "Peacebuilding Work," 87.

28 Quoted in Kipgen, "Peacebuilding Work," 87-88.

29 Telephone interview with Rev. Tsangkhiu, Executive Secretary, Yimchungru Baptist Boru Amukhungto, October 10, 2018.

30 Personal interview with Izieteilung Terieng, Executive Secretary, ZBCC, October 9, 2018.

local churches in the Chakpikarong area. On the same day, the MBCPC also organized pulpit exchanges in twenty-nine local churches of the Kukis and Nagas in Manipur. In the midst of violent conflict, it was not easy to visit the other areas. Nevertheless, through the initiatives of the MBCPC, the Naga church leaders visited the Kuki churches and the Kuki church leaders visited the Naga churches and preached about forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace.³¹ To cite another example, during the recent Chang-Yimchungru conflict in Tuensang District, Nagaland (2015), the church leaders visited one another's churches for prayer and preaching about reconciliation and peace.³² To preach about forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace in one's own church is one thing, but to take the risk of preaching the same thing in the churches in "enemy" areas is totally another. Despite the high risk, Christian leaders in NEI use the pulpit for ministry of peace in conflict situations. No matter how tense and precarious the situation may be, Christians have high regard for the word of God and for the spiritual leaders. As such, Christian leaders use their spiritual authority and the pulpit to preach the gospel of peace. The pulpit exchange ministry of Christian leaders helps to ease the tension and pave the way for reconciliation and peace between the conflicting parties.

Love Feasts for Peace

In the past, most of the tribals in NEI practiced headhunting for different reasons. While some tribes (such as the Mizos and Kukis) practiced headhunting to ensure the safe passage of their souls into heaven, others practiced it to obtain soul-power, which was believed to be in the victim's head.³³ But headhunting was mostly an act of revenge against the enemy.³⁴ Traditionally, when enemy villages wanted to end their enmity, the elders of the warring villages would either negotiate or employ a third party to mediate. When the negotiation or mediation was successful, villages at enmity would organize "peace feasts" in which both the parties would feast

31 Zeliang, *A History of the Manipur Baptist Convention*, 67.

32 Telephone interview with Rev. Tsangkhiu.

33 Kipgen, "Peacebuilding Work," 88.

34 S.K. Hokey, "The 57th Annual Meeting of the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India (CBCNEI) from April 12-15, 2007 at the Diphu Baptist Church, KarbiAnglong," 3.

together and play traditional games together, symbolizing reconciliation and promising to live in peace and harmony with one other. During the Kuki-Naga conflict in the 1990s, the MBC leadership adapted the traditional practice of the "peace feast" to bring peace between the Nagas and Kukis in Manipur. Accordingly, the MBC leaders organized agape feasts or love feasts in various places where both the Kukis and Nagas live together. The love feasts for peace were organized at Pallel and Tengnoupal in Chandel District, Kaithelmanbi and Kaiphundai in Tamenglong District, Kalapahar and Kayangkhang in Senapati District, and Litan and Kassom in Ukhrul District, Manipur.³⁵ Traditionally, it is taboo to share warm food with enemies. Only after peace and reconciliation can one share warm food with one's enemies. Sharing warm food and eating together symbolizes the presence of peace and harmony among the people. The hosting of love feasts and the participation of Christians in the feasts were symbolically declarations of peace among the people. The love feasts help to build confidence and pave the way for peace and reconciliation.

Peace Rallies, Appeals for Peace, and Peace Seminars

In times of conflicts and violence, Christian organizations often create public awareness through appeals to government authorities, civil society organization leaders, and the general public and by organizing peace rallies. Amid rising violence in the Garo Hills, the Roman Catholics and the Baptists in the region launched the Shalom Meghalaya Campaign at MP Stadium, Tura on August 17, 2014. The leaders of both the churches appealed for peace in the land. A crowd of about ten thousand vowed to restore peace in the Garo hills.³⁶

In January 2015, the Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC) team met the leaders of the Chang and Yimchungru tribes and appealed for the cessation of all forms of violence and for dialogue to resolve the conflict through peaceful means. From time to time, Christian organizations also create awareness through rallies for peace. For instance, during the Chang-Yimchungru tribal conflict, the youth department of the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India (CBCNEI) and the youth department of the

35 Hokey, "57th Annual Meeting," 3.

36 "Pledge for Peace in Garo Hills Held in Tura," <http://www.ohmeghalaya.com/pledge-for-peace-held-in-garo-hills/> (accessed June 26, 2019).

NBCC jointly organized a poster campaign with Bible verses at Tuensang Town, Chendang, and Shamator in Nagaland on March 4 and 5, 2015, and appealed for peace between the two conflicting tribes.³⁷

A few Christian organizations in the region have separate departments for peace affairs. For example, the CBCNEI has a Peace and Justice Department. It organizes peace workshops, seminars, and training especially for the Christian leaders in the region. The Peace and Development Department of the Manipur Baptist Convention (established in 2015) has been doing commendable work of peacebuilding in Manipur. Rev. T. Karang Maram, director of the department, reports that the department, in collaboration with the Evangelical Fellowship of India Commission on Relief (EFICOR), conducted a peace workshop for the executive secretaries of the twenty-nine MBC associations in 2015; five peace workshops for the association workers in the five hill district headquarters of Manipur in 2016; six peace workshops for women and youth department staffs of the associations in hill district headquarters, and also organized a three-day Manipur Peace Fest at the MBC campus in Imphal in 2017. It conducted twenty-nine peace workshops for the local church leaders in all the MBC association centers and thirteen peace events for children in 2018.³⁸ In 2019, the department conducted thirty peace workshops in the association centers for church leaders and civil society organization leaders and five peace events (painting and poem composition) for youth and children. Besides, the department also conducted a state-level peace conference at the MBC center in Imphal on November 28-29, 2019.³⁹ These initiatives show that Christians in the region register their protest against violence, appeal for peace, and create awareness for peaceful coexistence in society. Therefore, one can argue that Christians are not silent spectators of conflicts but are actively involved in peacebuilding in the region.

Relief and Humanitarian Services

Christians have a long tradition of relief and humanitarian services. When the Christians in Jerusalem were in need in the first century,

³⁷ Telephone interview with Vikho Rhi, June 26, 2019.

³⁸ Telephone interview with T. Karang Maram, Director, Peace and Development Department of Manipur Baptist Convention, June 26, 2019.

³⁹ Telephone interview with T. Karang Maram, August 14, 2019.

Christians in other places collected and sent relief to Jerusalem (2 Cor 9). Christian organizations on the international, national, regional, and local levels are actively involved in relief and humanitarian services when called for. In most of the serious conflicts in NEI, Christian organizations extended help to the victims. For instance, the North East India Committee on Relief and Rehabilitation (NEICORD), a Christian NGO, provided thirty-three forms of relief to victims of riots or ethnic clashes in NEI between 1984 and 2006. The relief usually comprised food, clothing, and medicine depending on the nature of the needs of the people. The state-wide relief efforts of the same period is as follows: two for Arunachal Pradesh, eight for Assam, ten for Manipur, five for Meghalaya, one for Mizoram, three for Nagaland, and four for Tripura.⁴⁰ During the Rabha-Garo conflict in Assam in 2011, over 30,000 people were left homeless after 1,500 houses in ninety villages along the Assam-Meghalaya border were burned. Christian organizations in the NEI, such as the Joint Peace Mission Team, Churches Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), the CBCNEI, and Missionary Sisters of Charity rushed to the site and provided emergency humanitarian aid, including tarpaulins, blankets, food, and medicine to the victims of the conflict.⁴¹ In a recent Chang-Yimchungru tribal conflict, the NBCC appealed “to the churches to extend relief for the people who are homeless,”⁴² and the churches responded positively. In major violent conflicts in the NEI, Christian organizations in the region always provide relief to the victims. Providing relief and humanitarian services to victims of conflicts by Christian organizations is an important Christian contribution to peacebuilding.

Mediation between Conflicting Parties

Mediation is a dynamic peace process in which a neutral party assists the disputants in resolving their conflict. Mediation is “a voluntary, informal,

40 Personal correspondence with Guithuilung Daimei, Executive Director, NEICORD, October 12, 2018.

41 “Peace Team Rushes Aid to Assam Clash Victims,” <https://www.ucanews.com/news/joint-peace-team-distributes-aid-to-clash-victims/3198> (accessed June 25, 2019).

42 “Tuensang Turmoil: Church Calls for ‘Forgiveness’ & ‘Reconciliation,’” <http://www.easternmirrornagaland.com/tuensang-turmoil-church-calls-for-forgiveness-reconciliation/> (accessed June 25, 2019).

non-binding process undertaken with an external party that fosters the settlement of differences or demands between directly invested parties.”⁴³ From time to time, representatives of Christian organizations act as mediators between conflicting parties and broker peace. For instance, at the height of political violence in Nagaland (then called Naga Hills), the Baptists in Nagaland formed the Naga Church Ministers’ Mission for Peace (NCMMP) in 1957 and appealed for peace, toured around the Naga areas, and preached nonviolence and peace.⁴⁴ In 1964, the NBCC formed a Peace Mission and the members mediated between the Government of India (GOI) and the NNC. After four months of mediation between representatives of the GOI and the NNC, leaders signed a ceasefire on September 6, 1964.⁴⁵ During the 1980s, the Zoram Kohhran Hruaitute Committee (ZKHC), which is the Mizoram Churches Leaders Committee, mediated between the GOI and the Mizo National Front (formed in 1961) and brought them to the negotiation table, which resulted in the signing of the historic Mizoram peace accord on June 30, 1986.⁴⁶ Between 2002 and 2003, the Khasi Jaintia Church Leaders Forum mediated between the Government of Meghalaya and the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council, but the Forum could not bring the two parties to the negotiation table.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the effort was not a complete failure as it resulted in the HNLC’s scaling down violence since then.

Moreover, some veteran Christian leaders are involved in mediation in their individual capacity or are invited by the conflicting parties to serve as mediators. The traditional practice of headhunting had resulted in villages

43 Christopher E. Miller and Mary E. King, *A Glossary of Terms and Concepts in Peace and Conflict Studies* (Geneva: University for Peace, 2005), 51.

44 Keviyiekielie Linyü, *Christian Movements in Nagaland* (Kohima: Author, 2004), 150.

45 Kari Longchar, “The Role of Church Leaders in Peacemaking: A Case Study of Naga Churches,” in *Peacemaking in North East India: Social and Theological Exploration*, ed. Yangkahao Vashum and Woba James (Jorhat: Tribal Study Center, Eastern Theological College, 2012), 64-66 [62-83].

46 “The Church Role in the Mizoram Peace Accord,” <http://www.easternpanorama.in/index.php/other-articles/72-2011/july-/1486-the-church-role-in-the-mizoram-peace-accord> (October 20, 2018); L. Gyanendra Singh, “Two Decades of Turmoil and Peace in Mizoram,” <http://www.garph.co.uk/IJARMSS/Oct2016/1.pdf>.

47 “Role of the Church in Conflict Resolution in Meghalaya, 2002-2003,” <https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/Meghalaya/backgrounder/church.htm> (accessed June 25, 2019).

treating one another as enemies. Although headhunting had gradually stopped with the arrival of the British and the expansion of Christianity, many villages did not conclude official peace treaties with their enemy villages. Christians in many villages, however, initiated peacebuilding with their former enemy villages, especially before their churches' jubilees. For instance, several churches and villages requested Irangcangbe Rangdaung (ca. 1933-), an evangelist of the Zeme Baptist Church Council, Peren (now retired), to mediate for peace with their former enemy villages. He carried out the mediation either alone or, occasionally, with a few companions. He and his team would visit the villages, meet the village elders (Christians and non-Christians), narrate the old stories of enmity, and suggest a symbolic peace treaty between the enemy villages to officially end the enmity. The symbolic peace treaty refers to the visit and hosting of the people of the erstwhile enemy village on an appointed day. In the past, people exchanged weapons such as spears and *daos* (swords) in addition to feasting and playing of traditional games and sports on the day of the peace treaty. Of late, instead of weapons, people exchange traditional shawls and the Holy Bible with one another in addition to feasting, thereby officially ending the enmity and heralding a new era of friendship between the villages. In Christian or Christian-dominated villages, the mediators would urge the people to forgive and make peace in the name of Jesus Christ who is God's ambassador of peace to the world. Mr. Irangcangbe and his team successfully mediated and brokered peace between several former archenemy villages prior to their churches' jubilees: between Mpung and Ziumi, Mpung and Mpai, Mpung and Tesen, and Mpung and Jalukie in 1981; between Poilwa and Puilwa in 1986; Puilwa and Tepun in 1987; Mpai and Nchangram in 1988; Peren and Mpa in 1990; Tesen and Mpai in 1992; Lamhai and Tesen in 1992; and Mpai and Peren in 1994.⁴⁸ Indeed, many Christian villages or villages in which Christians are the majority have made peace in the name of Christ with their former enemy villages.

48 Personal interview with Irangcangbe Rangdaung, Kezanglwa, July 15, 2019; cf. Rabi Pame, *History of Zehangrong Baptist Church in Nagaland: 1897-1993* (Nzauna: Nzauna Baptist Church, 2015), 83.

CONCLUSION

The people in the NEI region have been experiencing several violent conflicts for decades. In most cases, Christians belonging to different ethnic communities fought with fellow Christians on ethnic lines over ethnic identity, land, and political differences. Amid severe conflicts, Christian organizations in the region took up the challenge to become peacebuilders. In times of violent conflicts in the region, Christians are actively involved in peacebuilding through various initiatives: organizing fasting and prayers; pulpit exchange ministry; love feasts for peace; peace rallies, appeals, peace seminars; relief and humanitarian services; and mediation between conflicting parties. While these Christian initiatives may not always end the violent conflicts immediately, they certainly help in the peace processes. Some of the successful stories, discussed above, point to the fact that Christian peacebuilding initiatives have not only de-escalated tension and resolved conflicts in a peaceful manner but have also paved the way for building a just and sustainable peace in the region. As peace is a continuous process, Christians must continue to be active “peacemakers” (Mt 5:9) in order to build a just and peaceful society in the region.

About author

Elungkiebe ZELIANG (Dr. Theol., University of Heidelberg) is associate professor and head of the Department of Conflict Management and Peace Initiatives at Martin Luther Christian University, Shillong, India.