

JUSTPEACE THROUGH INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

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In April of 2003, more than 40 religious leaders and activists from different religious traditions gathered in Parapat, Indonesia for a consultation entitled “An Interfaith Endeavor to Learn from Each Other’s Wisdom to Live Together.” The consultation, jointly organized by Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), Asia-Pacific Alliance of YMCAs (APAY), Church Development Services (EED) and the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI), met following the events of 9/11 and the ensuing “War on Terror” to explore the need and possibility for an Asian interfaith cooperation movement in response to this growing global violence. The consultation ended in an appeal to the peoples and governments of Asia that “the world not allow their religions to be misused for political power and exploitation of weaker sectors of society”. They further called on all religious communities in Asia to “join hands to make our region one in which our shared values of peace, compassion, justice and harmony truly come to shape and characterize our Asian societies.”

At the close of the consultation the Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) was established to seek ways to bring this vision to the broader communities of faith in Asia through creative programs designed to build interfaith understanding, dialogue and harmony.

Two workshops were held the following year with the themes *Towards Gender Justice and Genuine Partnership of Women and Men* and *Young People as Peacemakers and Culture Bearers*. Through these two workshops, the ICF network was expanded and ideas gathered to help in formulating a concrete, action-oriented program of regional interfaith activities. By the end of 2004, a three-year program had been created with funding from EED.

The central pillar of this new interfaith movement is the School of Peace (SOP). Its design is based on an inter-active style of learning in which participants are selected based on their active involvement in interfaith justpeace work at the local level. Emphasis is placed on identifying young people from different religious traditions, ranging from 20 to 30 years of age, who have actively involved themselves in conflict situations in their local areas. In many cases, these are areas of open armed conflict involving groups of different religious traditions.

The first SOP was held from February to May 2006 in Bangalore, India with the cooperation of the Visthar Institute. Sixteen participants from Nepal, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Philippines, Kashmir, Manipur India and Thailand came together for this sharing and learning experience. They represented the religious traditions of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam and they spent three and a half months learning of each other’s traditions and struggles and seeking the courage to become engaged in sincere dialogue with each other. Through this experience they could gain a deeper understanding of the

roots of violence and the positive aspects of each religious tradition that can contribute to building communities of interfaith justpeace.

Building on the experience of the first SOP, the second course began on February 1, 2007 with nineteen youth from seven Asian countries attending. Once again the program was carried out in cooperation with the Visthar Institute and three modules, each lasting one month, were designed to give participants an intensive learning and interaction experience in the areas of “Self and Society,” “Faith, Culture and Spirituality” and “Transformation.” Representing the religious traditions of Hinduism, Animism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, the participants lived together, shared their personal faith journeys, listened to resource persons, engaged in intense dialogue and traveled into the countryside for relevant field experiences.

The participants come with a wealth of experience that they can share with each other. Mort, a young participant from Burma, was a child soldier with one of the ethnic rebel groups for two years before he became involved in a nonviolent form of revolution. He shares very personally about the frustration and anger that drives people to become involved in armed struggle and the hope his Christian spirituality brings to finding a better way of ending the oppression of the military junta and ushering in a time of justpeace.

Anik is a liberal Muslim from Indonesia and shares of his struggle to find a new interpretation of the Qur’an that emphasizes the teachings of peace and tolerance. Fundamentalist factions often threaten his organization yet with courage they continue their efforts.

Several Christian participants come from very conservative backgrounds and before joining the School of Peace had never been inside a mosque or temple. Learning more about other faiths has challenged them to step out of their comfort zones and engage with those who are different. Slowly interfaith dialogue begins to happen as people move from simply tolerating those who are different, to accepting them and finally engaging them in a mutual learning experience.

The School of Peace urges participants to begin the transformation process with themselves before trying to transform their communities or countries. Personal transformation can be a frightening experience as it forces us to move out of our comfort zones and into the unknown and the insecure. Learning to accept other faiths as having value and holding important learnings for us requires that we also be willing to question our understanding of our own faith and spirituality. As the participants learn to trust each other and feel supported as they move out from their comfort zones, personal transformation begins to happen.

This personal transformation leads them to begin thinking creatively and critically about how they will use their experiences and learnings once they return to their home communities and work. They now see interfaith dialogue as the flow of thought and inspiration between people who are different. This flow of thought and inspiration

focuses on differences rather than similarities and allows for new and deeper insights to emerge. Participants discover that they need not be threatened by the wisdom of other faiths if they are grounded well in their own faith and spirituality. With this understanding, interfaith cooperation for justpeace becomes an exciting possibility. It is this message that participants will take home with them and use to build new interfaith justpeace actions at the local level. The regional interfaith network, being created through the School of Peace, will provide them with courage in difficult times as they realize the power that comes from being one voice within their beautiful diversity.