

Report

Asian Religious Leaders Conference

'Be Peacemakers in Asia Today'

13-15 November 2007, Chiang Mai, Thailand

Background: The world we live is in another turning point in the human history. The present global situation is distorted by uncertainties, turbulence, conflicts, confrontation and violence in almost all aspects of human life.

All religions signify divine teaching and mandate. Religion has to be a source of peace. The encounter between people of different religious traditions takes place in the proximity of our own cities and neighborhoods. Increasingly, there have been many interfaith initiatives that have formed to demonstrate an alternative approach to difference, one grounded in the desire to make religious pluralism working for various religious traditions themselves and for our societies at large. Everyone deserves equal respect. Everyone is created by God and is God's creation.

A deeper understanding and commitment to religious diversity contributes to conflict resolution and peace-building. Life and peace cannot be approached in isolation from the rich religious resources and traditions. Participation in the struggles of people and commitment to religion are the two sides of the same coin. Through knowledge sharing, education and communication, interfaith initiatives provide the larger community with a model for managing peaceful negotiations of differences that reach beyond the boundaries of religious communities. In light of this, the Religious Leaders' Conference took place addressing "Be Peacemakers in Asia Today".

The conference

In this background (*Appendix 1*) Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) welcomed fifty-six participants (*Appendix 3*) from four religious traditions including Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Hinduism for a three-day conference. The event was held from 13-15 November 2007 at the Lotus Hotel Pang Suan Kaew in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

"Let the communities of faith speak out with clear, prophetic and moral voices, calling for an end to the conflict and death bred by the wars. Our religious leaders and institutions today need to openly explore the extent to which dialogue is moving from the level of words and ideas, to the next stage of social, economic and even political action to create a better world." Dr. Prawate Khid-arn, General Secretary of CCA said in his welcome note.

Objectives:

The objective of the conference was to bring issues related to peace and reconciliation into the focus of the interreligious debate. All religions are called by its divine faith to support, motivate and enhance its “holistic ministry” by equipping itself adequately towards solidarity and initiating a proactive role in building peace and justice.

The conference provided participants with an opportunity to:

- bring different religions and spiritual traditions together to acknowledge the closeness of their spiritual values and their commitment to interreligious dialogue
- to exchange individual or collective experiences to deepen understanding of the values of cultural diversity and to learn to “live together” peacefully
- to discuss mutual views on peace and reconciliation and develop common ways of responding to violence and foster the spirit of reconciliation
- to reanimate Asian religious and cultural heritage, to preserve human dignity, and to promote justice and peace in the Asia-Pacific region

Expected outcomes:

It is expected that when participants return to their home countries and workplace, they will develop and improve policies that engage and support role of religion in building communities of peace for all. The presentations, case studies, workshops and discussions aims to facilitate:

- strengthening interreligious dialogue and cooperation as an urgent task of building inter-faith communities of peace and justice
- initiating a proactive inter-faith response to challenging contexts and realities of Asia
- promoting justice, reconciliation and peace towards building harmonious relationships in Asia

Proceedings and resolutions: The program as cited in (*Appendix 2*) followed

November 12: Most participants reached Chiang Mai and registered at the hotel where accommodation was reserved. The meeting of the resource persons, presenters and group facilitators was held at 19:00.

November 13: The conference officially began with a moment of personal devotion, followed by the welcome note by Dr. Prawate Khid-arn, General Secretary of CCA.

Program of the day included:

Panel Presentation 1: “Role of Religion in Conflict and Peacemaking” by Dr. Kyoichi Sugino and Dr. Mark Tamthai

Panel Presentation 2: “Is Religious Fundamentalism a source for Violence?” by speakers representing four religions traditions.

The session focused on two related and paradoxically poised propositions. One, religion has often been a source of conflict. Two, religion also nurtures within it possibilities of transcending the narrow and divisive confines of identity, perceptions and commitments. The historical-geographical referent for looking at the play and implications of the two paradoxically poised propositions is the vast continental space of Asia.

Group discussion 1: To give discussion a clear focus the concept note “Is Religious Fundamentalism a source for Violence?” participants were divided into four groups to discuss the following questions:

1. Why religions are often accused of being co-opted by the power?
2. How does religion, which speaks about love, compassion and mercy, also become a tool of violence?
3. How exclusive dimensions religion contribute to intolerance and violence?
4. How religions are used to solve conflicts?

November 14:

Presentation 4: “Spirituality for Transformation and Partnership for Peacemaking” (Mr. I.B. Wiyana)

Case Study 1: “Interreligious cooperation for Peace-building and Conflict Transformation in Asia”

- Buddhism (Ven. P. Assaji Thero)
- Hinduism (Dr. Suresh Sharma)
- Christianity (Rev. Dr. Rienzie perera / Rev. Dr. Margaretha Hendriks)
- Islam (Ms. Amirah Ali Lidasan)

Group Workshop: Discussions focused on the following global issues:

- Human Rights
- Poverty
- Health
- Environment

November 15: The morning session was devoted to finalise the following agenda:

- Statement of commitment (*Appendix 5*)
- Action Plan for Future Cooperation, and
- Closing Act and Vote of Thanks (Dr. Prawate Khid arn)

Building Together: In coordination with the Habitat for Humanity, participants took part in building two houses for the poor at Pa Pong village, Doi Saket District, located around 30 kilometers from the city. The activity

was not only to build the house, but was aimed to promote fellowship and partnership among friends from different faith and religious backgrounds.

Recommendation and follow up: The conference discussed and identified the areas of human rights, poverty, health and environment for necessary action.

- Strengthening interreligious networks at local, national and international levels
- Working towards sensitising the communities in one's own religious tradition for becoming agents of peace and reconciliation
- Advocating policies of good governance, respect for human rights, especially women and children rights, and care for the nature
- Equipping people to stand against communal, religious, ethnic violence and violence against women
- Exchanging information among religious communities for promoting cooperation and solidarity
- Sharing human and financial resources for promoting a culture of peace
- Forming an Interreligious Task Force for advocating and promoting human rights
- Organising events to lobby with international forums and institutions, like the UN and other similar bodies for more ethically inspired foreign policies
- Responding to policies issued by multi-lateral institutions, such as World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Trade Organisation (WTO)
- Negotiating with major religious communities and governments in countries, where minority communities feel insecure, for complementing effective policies and initiating peace processes

Practical follow up: The meeting signified closer cooperation and intended for recommendations being implemented. CCA has been requested to follow up the recommendations by setting up a small "Continuation Task Force".

Finance: The conference received financial support (*Appendix 4*) from various organisations namely WCC–Ecumenical Scholarship Fund (ESF), Niwano Peace Foundation (NPF), United Church of Christ in Canada (UCC), Asian Conference for Religion and Peace (ACRP), Council for World Mission (CWM), Presbyterian Church, Canada (PCC), Church of Scotland, Uniting Church in Australia, and the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK).

The expenditure covered travel subsidy, accommodation and food, materials and documents, local transportation and coordination. Some amount is used for publications.

Appendix 1: Background

We are living in another turning point in human history. The present global situation is distorted by uncertainties, turbulence, conflict, confrontation and violence in almost all aspects of human life. With technological progress we are able to find a new world of prosperity, but at the same time we see violence and intolerance everywhere in the world. We experience uncertainty, problems and volatility in our economic, social and political life.

We continue to live in another divided and conflicting society. Peace in Sri Lanka appears to be totters as suicide bombing returned and the government-LTTE peace talks suspended. More than 30,000 Sri Lankan ordinary people, officer, soldiers died since the armed struggle began. In Nepal, the decade-long insurgency has taken more than 12,500 lives. In the southern Thailand, peace is still unreachable.

In spite of global economic and technological advancement, poverty continues a nightmare of majority. Many people in Asian countries have been left jobless and unemployed. Forced migration is a result of the collapse in basic agriculture, small – holders farming and small business entrepreneurs, many of them end up as migrant workers in the more affluent cities and countries.

Thus it is not surprising that the number of migrants worldwide has increased to 175 million in 2000, or double the number compared to 1975. These figures do not even include undocumented migrants who are estimated to be around 35 million people. If we would compare only the number of documented migrants to the world's population, one in 35 people are migrants. Of these, 120 million are migrant workers while the rest are refugees, asylum seekers and permanent immigrants. Half of these are women.¹ In Asia alone 49.9 million or 1.4% of its population are migrants² from the developing economy of Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, and the Philippines.

Worsening state of ecological system is another threat to majority of people. Environmental decay and destruction is happening in many countries specifically to the Third World countries. Global warming, denudation of remaining forest, degradation of marine life among others are related to the greediness of the few at the expense of many. While few are enjoying the blessings of nature majority are suffering from the backlash of being irresponsible stewards of God's creation.

Health is one of the basic needs of people. But due to poverty and unemployment many people are dying without giving a proper health care and attention. The increasing number of malnutrition among the people of Asia, Africa and Latin America is tantamount of saying that health is no longer a basic right of people rather it is a privilege among the few. Worse, people who are being affected with HIV/ AIDS are continuously increasing nowadays. Majority of them are women and children who are wittingly and unwittingly allowed themselves to be trafficked

¹ ***Impact of Globalization on Women Migrants***, Prepared by: Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM), Asia Pacific Women Law and Development (APWLD) and Korean House for International Solidarity (KHIS), submitted to Asia Pacific Research Network

² Based on UNDESA, World Bank, IOM, ILO and UNHCR Report of 2005, www.ilo.org

knowing that they will be able to bring their family out of poverty and malnutrition. Worse, people who are suffering from HIV/ AIDS are discriminated and considered as sinners specifically from churches who do not understand their situation.

The questions that we are facing together as religious communities are, whether these conflicts are affecting religion? What is peace the world is crying for? Where are religions when people are crying for peace? How do religions become peacemakers?

Religious Response

Beyond diversity of culture, language, race, geography, history, faith and religion, the common core of all humanity is life and peace. All religions signify this divine teaching and mandate. It is only unfortunate that often religions are used to separate people and destroy, rather than uniting and strengthening life. Such untoward developments need to be encountered at all levels.³

Religion is a source of peace. The encounter between people of very different religious traditions takes place in the proximity of our own cities and neighborhoods. Increasingly, there have been many interfaith initiatives that have formed to demonstrate an alternative approach to difference, one grounded in the desire to make religious pluralism work for the various religious traditions themselves and for our societies at large. Everyone deserves equal respect. Everyone is created by God and being His creature. The formula for peace according to Hinduism is mutual coexistence. The formula for peace according to Buddhism is non-violence. The Christian formula for peace is based on the concept of unilateral adjustment. And the Islamic formula for peace is respect for all.⁴

A compelling question for people of faith today is how to remain committed to one's own religious tradition while being open to the beauty and truth of other religions. But people engaged in dialogue have felt their own faith challenged and deepened by the new dimensions of religious life which they have observed, and many find in interaction and dialogue people of other faiths a new momentum for doing theology and reviving spirituality.

A deeper understanding and commitment to religious diversity contributes to conflict resolution and peace-building. The issue related to life and peace cannot be approached in isolation from the rich religious resources and traditions. Participation in the struggles of people and commitment to ultimate mystery of religion are the two sides of the same coin. They make a complete paradigm.⁵ Through knowledge sharing, education and communication, interfaith initiatives provide the larger community with a model for managing peaceful negotiations of differences that reach beyond religious community boundaries. In light of this analysis, the conference of religious leaders is initiated.

In light of this, peace building can only do if the religious communities- Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Jew, Hindu and other faiths, are united in the spirit of unity and harmony.

³ S. Robertson, *Religion as Life-Sustaining-A Pluralistic Perspective*, *Religion and Society*, Vol. 51, No. 1, March 2006.

⁴ Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, *Peace and Religion*,

⁵ S. Robertson, *op.cit.*, p.3.

General objective: The main objective of the Conference is to bring issues related to peace and reconciliation into the focus of the religions. All religions have been called by its divine faith to support, motivate and enhance its “holistic ministry” by equipping itself adequately towards solidarity and initiating a proactive role in building peace and justice.

Specific objectives: The conference will provide participants with an opportunity

- to bring the different religions and spiritual traditions together to acknowledge the closeness of their spiritual values and their commitment to inter-religious dialogue
- to exchange individual or collective experiences to deepen understanding of the values of Cultural Diversity and to learn to “live together” better
- to discuss mutual views on peace and reconciliation and develop common ways to peacefully respond to violence and foster the spirit of reconciliation
- to reanimate Asian religious and cultural heritage, to preserve human dignity, and to promote justice and peace in the Asia-Pacific region

Expected Outcome: We envisage that the presentations, case studies, workshops and discussions will facilitate:

- strengthening inter-religious dialogue and cooperation in the urgent task of building inter-faith communities of peace and justice
- initiating a proactive inter-faith response to challenging contexts and realities in Asia
- promoting justice, reconciliation and peace towards building harmonious relationships in Asia

Participants: Around 60 participants from various religions- Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and Hindu in Asian countries are invited. Equal representation of participants will be carefully considered to ensure voices of all religions are included.

Venue Lotus Hotel (Pang Suan Kaew), Chiang Mai, Thailand

Date 12 (arrival) -16 (departure) November 2007

Appendix 2:
Program

Date/ Time	Nov. 12 Sun.	Nov. 13 Mon.	Nov. 14 Tue.	Nov. 15 Wed.	Nov. 16 Thu.	
08:30- 10:00	A R R I V A L & R E G I S T R A T I O N	Opening / Welcome / Program Overview	Panel Presentation II “Spirituality for Transformation and Partnership for Peace Making”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Statement of commitment ▪ Action Plan ▪ Closing Act 	D E P A R T U R E	
10:00- 11:30		Keynote Presentation “Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace Making”	Case Study I “Inter-religious cooperation for Peace Building and Conflict Transformation in Asia” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Buddhism ▪ Hinduism 			
10:00- 10:15		COFFEE BREAK				
10:15- 11:30		Panel Presentation I “Is Religious Fundamentalism a source for Violence?”	Case Study II “Inter-religious cooperation for Peace Building and Conflict Transformation in Asia” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Christianity ▪ Islam 			
11:30- 13:00		LUNCH				
13:00- 15:00		Discussion “Is Religious Fundamentalism a source for Violence?”	Workshop Inter-religious Cooperation on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Human Rights ▪ Poverty ▪ Health ▪ Environment 	Building houses together - in Cooperation w/ The Habitat for Humanity at Pa Pong Sub- district, Doi Saket		
15:00- 15:30		COFFEE BREAK				
15:30- 17:30		Plenary	Plenary			
17:30- 19:00		DINNER				
19:00- 20:30		Orientation	Plenary	Plenary		Free

Appendix 5: **Statement of Commitment**

Religious leaders, scholars and peace advocates from the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Islamic traditions met at Lotus Hotel, Chiang Mai, on 13–15 November 2007, in a spirit of celebrating the diverse spiritual and cultural heritage of Asia and with a deep commitment to further the peace initiatives. The thematic of the conference was: “Be Peacemakers in Asia today”.

The participants met at a time when conflicts affecting millions of people of all faiths are taking place within and among nations and communities. The attempt was to analyze and understand the nature of these conflicts and their varied dimensions. It was distressing to note that in many situations leaders and institutions of religion are co-opted by powers that be. In certain cases they seem themselves to be guilty of instigating or condoning violence. This phenomenon raises a grave question concerning the role and purpose of religion in the world today.

The keynote addresses highlighted the positive and negative practices and interpretations of religion. They sought to clarify the role of religion in peacemaking as well as in causing conflict. They affirmed that the basic thrust of religion is to nurture life and provide for human beings to live in harmony with one another and nature. Religions in different ways have laid down the spiritual basis for a just and moral human order. Religions as communities have also kept alive social networks of solidarity with all, including the marginalized, discriminated and oppressed.

The keynote addresses also focused upon instances and situations wherein religious leaders and institutions allowed themselves to be used by powers that be to suppress and violate the rights and dignity of helpless innocent people. When religion gets distorted in this manner, it loses its relevance and legitimacy. As persons committed to religion, the participants felt the need of restating and reaffirming the basic liberating and life-affirming nature of religion.

Speakers from various traditions addressed the problem of religious fundamentalism that sometimes occur because of misinterpretation of religions and as a reaction to repressive political decisions and few unethical international laws is one of the sources of violence. Fundamentalism in making exclusive claims of purity and truth tend to breed intolerance and violence. It was felt that critical interpretation of scriptures and sacred texts is necessary for working towards justice, peace and a decent human order in an increasingly global world. It was agreed that violence cannot be eradicated as long as people are denied the right to food, shelter, education, freedom of speech and belief, participation in decision making.

Spirituality is an experience shared by all religious traditions. It is not and has never been an escape from the realities of life. Spirituality empowers us to overcome fear, powerlessness and divisions within a community as also to transcend and converse across

the boundaries of religions. It has been and can become the basis for transforming distrust and conflict into reconciliation and enduring peace.

Co-operation among different religious communities calls for a spirit of mutual respect, tolerance, accountability and a culture of open dialogue. In a world ever more closely connected, we need to constantly learn from each other. That requires a strong commitment to allow critical discussion, debate and dissent within one's own religion. Such a process holds the promise making possible the coming together of different religious traditions to undertake concrete initiatives for peace, reconciliation and harmony.

The conference discussed and identified the areas of human rights, poverty, health and environment for necessary action.

- Strengthening inter-religious networks at local, national and inter-national levels
- Working towards sensitizing the general public in one's own religious tradition for becoming agents of peace and reconciliation
- Advocating policies of good governance, respect for human rights, especially women and children rights, care for nature
- Equipping people to stand against communal, religious, ethnic violence and violence against women
- Exchanging information among religious communities for promoting cooperation and solidarity
- Sharing human and financial resources for promoting a culture of peace
- Forming an inter-religious Task Force for advocating and promoting human rights
- Organizing events to lobby international forums and institutions, like the UN and other similar bodies for more ethically inspired foreign policies
- Responding to policies issued by multi-lateral institutions, such as World Bank, IMF and WTO
- Negotiating with major religious communities and governments, in countries, where minor communities feel insecure, for complementing effective policies and initiating peace processes