

Asian Conference of Religions for Peace

The 7th Assembly Manila Declaration

INTRODUCTION

The Asian Conference of Religions for Peace, also known as Religions for Peace Asia, is the world's largest regional body of religiously inspired people working for peace, harmony and personal well-being in their countries, in the Asia-Pacific region and across the world. The Seventh Assembly met in metropolis Manila from 17th to 21st of October 2008 under the theme, Peacemaking in Asia, with the participation of around 400 people as delegates and observers from many countries belonging to all the principal religions of Asia – Buddhist, Baha'l, Christian, Confucian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Shinto, Sikh, Tao, Zoroastrian and others. Working in tandem with its partner and parent, Religions for Peace International, the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace works to co-ordinate the various Asian religious heritages in pursuing peace and interreligious harmony based on the tenets of truth, justice and the transcendent dignity of the human person.

The Asian Conference of Religions for Peace encompasses the Asia-Pacific region, stretching from the countries of the Middle East and South Asia up to Central Asia across to East Asia and South-East Asia and down to the countries of the South Pacific. Within these boundaries are contained many of the greatest cultural, linguistic and spiritual heritages that celebrate the diversity of humanity. Within these boundaries are contained over half the world's population, including seven of the twelve most populous nations led by China and India.

Begun in 1974, Religions for Peace Asia held its First Assembly in 1976 in Singapore. Since then, Assemblies have been held in New Delhi (1981), Seoul (1986), Kathmandu (1991), Ayutthaya in Thailand (1996) and in Jogjakarta (2002). The member countries are Australia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Democratic Republic of Korea, the Republic of Korea, Mongolia, Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. During this Assembly, Iraq and Malaysia were admitted as new members. As well, there were observers from Iran and Kyrgyzstan.

PEACEMAKING IN ASIA

The theme of Peacemaking in Asia was chosen because of the importance of making peace in a world that has become a more dangerous and more risky place in which to live and work. Across Asia and the world, we see a religious resurgence but also the rise of religious extremism and terrorism. Many Asian countries are still riven with conflict and division. The danger of nuclear weapons has not subsided in the region nor has the process of militarization diminished. Thus, the quest of peace remains urgent. Faith traditions betray their authentic messages if they do not commit themselves to making and building peace, and to resolving and preventing conflict.

Since the turn of the Millennium, various parts of the Asian neighbourhood have been devastated by floods, bushfires, earthquakes, droughts and the huge tsunami that made the lives of the poor even more distressing. The resilience of the people, strengthened by their transcendent values, in recovering from their predicaments continues to draw admiration. Corruption together with political and economic incompetence still continues to stalk Asia, yet participatory governance continues to make gains.

Much economic progress has recently been made across the Asia-Pacific region as nations have lifted their peoples out of poverty. But there still remain countries and parts of countries that are mired in poverty where people have little or no control over their lives. The riches of the rich continue to mock the poverty of the poor. And it is women and children who are most often the victims of poverty. The growth of the new information and communication technologies has continued but some people are being left behind, unable to lock into the global networks, thus unable to benefit from a networked world of the Internet and the mobile. This Assembly was held during the financial tsunami that engulfed the world in late 2008, caused by the avarice, greed and ignorance of the financiers in the world's global financial centres.

The Assembly was held in Manila, the leading city of the contract worker movement. More and more people are forced to leave their homeland to seek work in other, even distant, parts of the globe. Always overworked and often exploited, and sometimes victims of industrial accidents or sexual attacks, they labor for their

families left behind. Then there are the refugees and the asylum seekers in search of new homes after fleeing from war and finding temporary asylum in a refugee camp.

The longing for peace and well-being is the central message of all religions; it is the essential good that all men and women must strive for, peace across the Asia-Pacific region and the world, peace and social cohesion in every society, personal well-being in terms of food, water, money, shelter and of spiritual fulfilment. Outer peace is the fruit of justice and development; inner peace is the deep silence of our minds and hearts that resonates and reverberates through the virtues and values of a moral life.

The Assembly examined peacemaking in Asia according to five perspectives:
PEACEMAKING THROUGH HUMAN AND SHARED SECURITY AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

The peoples of Asia are weighed down by feelings of insecurity, instability and confusion in these troubled times. Achieving human security is foundational to global peace and national cohesion. The UNDP's Human Development Report outlined how human security is comprised of seven elements: (1) economic security (2) food security (3) health security (4) environmental security (5) personal security (6) community security and (7) political security which all in turn are based on the sharing of security across the world as a joint regional and global enterprise.

Peacemaking in Asia and the Pacific will therefore, be enacted and realized through joint sharing of security concerns, needs and solutions, and through transforming, mitigating and resolving conflict. This Commission examined the changing nature of conflict in today's world, the emergence of different types of violence and terrorism with international and local warlords and failed or belligerent states, the continuing spread of arms and the need for disarmament. Amongst the causes of conflict and violence are hunger and poverty, deprivation and discrimination, the demand for equitable sharing of physical resources and the quest for ethnic superiority; amongst the results are refugees and asylum seekers, including in one's own country, and the deepening of hatred, leading to crime and violence. Religious leaders have a role in building up a nation's social wealth and in any reconciling and healing process as they mobilize their communities for the

common good. They must be committed to building religious moderation and resisting religious and political extremism. Conflict resolution needs to be linked to the resources of faith communities, their part in conflict mitigation and conflict transformation, including disarmament and refugee return, and their role in building peace over the medium- and long-term. It must also be based on a thorough mapping of the conflict in understanding the grievances and the combatants.

PEACEMAKING THROUGH HUMAN OBLIGATIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES AND PEACE EDUCATION

Peacemaking in Asia and the Pacific must be based around individual and collective human obligations and responsibilities and on initiatives in educating for peace. This Assembly dealt with the philosophical and religious underpinnings of human dignity and group interdependence that lie deep in the Asian traditions, including the obligations to conserve life and property, the obligation to protect minority groups, the obligation to protect those who practise and voluntarily change their religion, the special responsibility towards the care of women and children and of the family and the overall responsibility for human development and sustainability.

Promoting peace includes education for peace and shared security, the aims and processes of multi-cultural, multi-religious and inter-faith education, the need for and delivery of diversity and cross-cultural interaction training, the processes of inter-religious dialogue and of anti-corruption vigilance and pluralist education in and for living in the global neighbourhood. The various initiatives in values education, peace education, global education, intercultural education, etc., can be built around the notion of education for global and national citizenship to underpin curriculum frameworks in schools and in special university programs.

PEACEMAKING THROUGH COMMON VALUES AND COMMUNITY

BUILDING Peacemaking in Asia and the Pacific can only be achieved through the articulation and pursuit of common values and through the process of building community at all levels. This Assembly endeavoured to identify the commonalities in ethical frameworks through comparing the various religious values and moralities as well as the articulation of democratic values for national governance emerging from the different philosophical systems. It found the Global Ethic

framework to be a powerful educative framework, especially when related to global citizenship. Phenomena such as global poverty, corruption and global warming represent blights on the face of humanity. They represent failures in outlining and implementing value frameworks by cooperative communities. The role of the state is paramount in value creation and value building and in strengthening and maintaining communities, in controlling and eliminating racism, casteism, bigotry and corruption, especially in the creating of culturally and religiously diverse societies and managing religious diversity. The role of the internet in building or destroying community and in disseminating the hate and pornographic industry is becoming more powerful, and this issue needs to be addressed because of its powerful influence on children and students.

PEACEMAKING THROUGH SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Peacemaking in Asia and the Pacific can only be brought about by sustainable development built upon genuine social and economic justice. This Assembly addressed the central issue of our times of sustainable development as both economic development and care for the environment in protecting it both locally and globally. The Commission noted the huge rise in the number of refugees despite Asia's tremendous economic growth. This is because attention is focused only on economic development or economic development is pursued for monetary gain, and not on economic morality and personal ethics. The current economic crisis has highlighted the greed of rich financiers and the inexperience of younger financiers.

Religion has a key role in advancing national economic development whilst also caring for the environment, especially in the face of global warming. Sustainable development directly relates to shared security. The key value here is social justice as related to the accountability of political leaders and the challenging of corruption. The role of faith communities is facilitating the advocacy of social justice issues and the process of educating for social justice. The religious communities will have to play a more proactive role in facilitating the advocacy of social and economic justice issues and the process of educating for social justice. At times, religion must be counter-cultural in challenging contemporary injustices and corruption.

PEACEMAKING THROUGH HEALING THE PAST AND BUILDING THE FUTURE

Peacemaking in Asia and the Pacific must be concerned with the healing of the past and the historic wrongs and mistakes and the joint building of a more harmonious, vibrant and sustainable future. This Assembly concerned itself with addressing the issue of overcoming the burdens of the past through forgiveness, reconciliation and spiritual healing of the memories yet also acknowledging the role of religion in causing suffering and generating intolerance. In the context of the Mindanao conflict, the call for building the future can be built around a Culture of Peace which incorporates personal and family integrity, the promotion of human rights and democracy, poverty eradication, intercultural understanding and solidarity, disarmament and the cessation of hostilities and environmental protection and the operative values of spirituality, justice, unconditional compassion, dialogue, active non-violence and stewardship. Careful plans must be implemented in order to heal the past and create a worthwhile future.

DIALOGUE AND RECIPROCITY

In all the discussions during the Assembly, the need to dialogue and the need for dialogue were of central concern. Dialogue is the deep listening to each other; it is a multilayered process adapted to the different levels of a society. Dialogue has been described as two mirrors facing and reflecting each other in an endless deepening of understanding and meaning. It is based on the development of the common discourse of language or, at least, an awareness of the discourse used by the other.

True dialogue is characterised by trust, sincerity and humility; it also shows respect for the larger questions of life: our origins as human beings, the purpose for living, our relationship to the transcendent. Its obstacles are an obsession with the past and historical grievances, a spirit of mistrust and suspicion, a phobia towards change, the running of a political or religious agenda, the attempt to convert or denigrate another faith or ethnicity, and the attitude of national or religious superiority.

The discussions highlighted the importance of the principle of reciprocity. As ethnic and religious Diasporas develop, with the movements of peoples, there ought to be across the world a commitment to the just and principled treatment of minorities by the mainstream groups in each country in the spirit of reciprocity.

The Assembly has adopted the following recommendations as part of a strategy for the coming five years:

RECOMMENDATIONS

Each national chapter devise and present to the next executive committee meeting in 2010 its action plan for helping to bring peace and social cohesion to its people and nation state

Each national chapter has established in one of its universities a Centre for Dialogue and these Centres for Dialogue form an Asian network to work for peace, do research and provide informed to ACRP/WCRP

Each national chapter work to establish local interfaith bodies to address local concerns and grievances, especially in areas of high or increasing tensions, and secondly to address through selected strategies such as truth commissions the healing of spiritual and psychological wounds in the aftermath of a conflict

The appropriate national chapters, in the aftermath of a conflict and in those countries receiving refugees from the conflict, work to have the government establish a therapeutic centre to provide specialist assistance for the recovery of torture and trauma survivors

The appropriate national chapters, in the aftermath of a conflict and as a way of healing the past, cooperate to arrange inter-country visits to the actual places of war atrocities in order to hold joint memorial services of healing

Each national chapter strongly lobby its government 1) to sign the treaty against cluster bombs and 2) to sign the non-proliferation treaty to abolish all nuclear weapons by 2020

Each national chapter encourage its educational authorities to introduce curricula that aim at education for global and national citizenship

ACRP's executive committee establish a finance and marketing committee to raise funds from governments, supra-governmental agencies, international and national banks and all other possible sources in order to increase its funding sources so as to broaden its funding base to support its activities and its community and fact-finding projects

As one Master reminded the Assembly, confidence is the key to success, confidence in our own faiths, in our own spiritualities, in our own virtues and in our own wisdoms, achieved through education in the messages and sayings of the great

religious figures of history who all were teachers. The Assembly thanks all those working for peace; may they be blessed with happiness and fulfilment. It honours the great ACRP leaders who have recently passed on, and support our current leaders at a time when religious leaders are under greater scrutiny and accountability. It commends to the Assembly the Parliament of the World's Religions, the world's largest interfaith gathering, to be held in Melbourne in December 2009. It also commends the proposal for a United Nations Decade of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace and hopes that the Asian governments supported by their national chapters will support this initiative.