

INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE AT GRASS ROOT LEVEL

History of dialogue among the people of different cultures, different religions and ideologies is as old as the human civilization itself; so also the methodology applied in such exercises. Plato immortalized the process, and the method, through his most loved treatise on the life of his Guru, Socrates, and other philosophical works.

Twentieth century can be marked as the century of dialogues. There was hardly any sphere of human life, and concern, that was not, directly or indirectly, affected by this process. Many wars were averted, many disputes were settled, many problems were solved and many crises were resolved with the help of this process of understanding and reconciliation. The process must go on if the same peace and harmony has to be maintained and enhanced in this century too.

Human life today is multi-dimensional; the fast expanding globalization process is forcing many unwilling humans to accept the fact, if they would like to survive the onslaught of the process. Pluralism is not only a part of human personality; it is the very part of social, political, economic and religious situation of the world in which we find ourselves to live in. In the context of religious pluralism, a reality all around the world, an exploration into different religions and cultures will strengthen communal harmony among the members of emerging global villages. This exploration leads us into dialogue with people of different faiths and cultures, recognizing their existence, acknowledging positive elements, without compromising religious convictions. The church leaders – ministerial as well as lay, along with the Christian community in general, needs to be educated/trained for this task in the this millennium.

One can remember with appreciation, and gratitude, the contributions of structured dialogue process that was initiated and developed by the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. They have been first to institutionalized the dialogue process and have brought leaders of various religions at the table to engage in serious conversation on the matters that concern the people of their respective communities and world at large. In this short paper, I wish to present the recent contribution of Lutheran Churches in this continued process of dialoguing among the people of different faiths for communal harmony and mutual understanding of their witnessing faith, through the involvement of local congregations and Christian individuals.

The plan can be suitably amended and augmented as per the needs and contexts of the community.

LWF initiative

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) wishes to exhort the member churches in India, as well as in other parts of the world, to participate in the study project so that the impact of inter-faith dialogue on the life and mission of churches may be studied and evaluated. It is hoped that the project, and the results, will be practical and relevant to the life and witness of member churches. It is also hoped that the dialogue-study will not be conducted in isolation. A very useful

suggestion is made, by way of the guideline, to include equal number of Hindu partners in each dialogue study group.

This study is for a period of three years, starting from 1999 and its result will be made available to the member churches.

Aims and Objectives

To undertake systematic study to understand religious and philosophical concepts in Hinduism and Christianity.

To understand prevailing attitudes and practices of Hindus and Christians.

To seek and promote friendship, understanding, reciprocity and co-operation between Hindus and Christians.

To inculcate tolerance and peaceful coexistence, without losing sight of guiding principles of love and justice, among the people of different faiths.

To provide a proper setting for mutual witness.

To seek ways and means for the expression of faith, through acts of loving concern, in a concrete and practical way.

To foster peace, reconciliation and mutual respect between Hindu and Christian communities..

To work unceasingly towards communal harmony in a religiously plural society, such as ours, in India.

To establish an inter-religious forum for discussing subjects of common concerns, such as world peace, ecological crisis, role of religion in social, political and economic context, etc.

To bring out the contribution of Lutheran Churches towards promotion of inter-faith relations.

Terms of reference

The program is to be prepared, keeping in mind the needs and the expectations of the laity- both Hindus and Christians. It has to be life oriented, relevant to the daily lives of the people, dealing with very practical issues. It is recognized that much intellectual and academic exercises have already taken place, and the time has come to filter it down to the ground realities.

The programme is oriented towards mutual sharing and is not, in any way, directed towards conversion motives. The Hindu partners in dialogue should not be left in any doubt about the sincerity of their counter-part among Christians.

It is also suggested that theological issues, as far as possible, should be kept out-side the scope of discussions in the dialogue groups.

Meetings, in which maximum participation of each and every individual is possible, will be most suitable. They will provide time for sharing faith stories, interaction on matters of common concerns and opportunities to form a new relationship of everlasting friendship at personal levels.

Formation of Study Groups

The Study Group shall be formed under the following guidelines:

Five Representative Lutheran congregations within United Evangelical Lutheran Church in India shall be selected.

From these selected congregations, five members, preferably those working in church/secular institutions will be invited to be a unit group.

The unit groups will invite five members from Hindu community, who are in the same wavelength as they, to be the partners in dialogue.

The difficulty in defining Hinduism is well recognized; so also the movements for the self-identity of Dalits and Tribals within the Hindu fold. It is suggested that the problem is not to be overlooked and the participation of dalits and tribal in the dialogue groups should be consciously ascertained.

Similar groups may be formed in other parts of the world.

Criteria for membership

The members for the dialogue groups shall be carefully selected in order to provide proper representations to every section of membership in the Church.

Majority of members should be those engaged in secular professions and living in religiously pluralistic communities dominated by the Hindus.

There shall be a representation of women and youth in the group.

Care shall be taken to ascertain the willingness of the members and their commitment to the study project.

Methodology for working in dialogue groups

The groups shall appoint their own Chairperson/moderator and recording secretaries.

The core unit groups shall meet 6-8 times over a period of a year for down-to-earth dialogue-meetings.

The time and place of group meetings shall be decided by the group. (It is suggested that the groups meet at the homes of each members in turn)

Records of each meeting will be prepared and kept by each group, which can be shared with other groups.

There shall be an annual meeting of all the members of core unit groups in which the experiences will be shared and reports will be analyzed.

Agenda for regular meetings

The agenda and the general topics for discussion/information shall be decided by the groups in their previous meeting.

It is suggested that the matters that concern the social, economic, spiritual and political life of the community in general should have the priority for sharing sessions.

Meeting Plan

Meeting with the Pastors of the congregation to raise awareness on the concern for religious dialogue and national harmony will be taken up.

Meeting will be arranged with selected members, both from Christian and Hindu communities, to raise awareness about interfaith dialogues and their role in promoting religious harmony.

There will be 6-8 sessions in one year in actual dialogue sessions. Agenda will be worked out by the members attending the second meeting with the guide lines provided by the Organization Committee

At the end of the 8 sessions of dialogues at congregational level the Organization Committee will study the results of the congregational dialogue meetings and further course of action for the following two years.

Preliminary experiences

The Church as an institution and a worshipping community takes some time to get involved in something that is not directly related to the spiritual aspect of their faith. One needs to be patient and persuasive in his approach as Rev. Dr. Ingo Wulfhorst, Department of Theology and Study Secretary for Church and People of Other Faiths at Lutheran World Federation agrees and points out what Dr. Hans Ucko, Officer on Inter-religious Relations of the World Council of Churches stated in an interview: "We should remember that inter-religious dialogue is not an ambulance. It is a prophylactic medicine (*) Inter-faith dialogue has to go slow in order to go deep." (Current Dialogue 37, June 2001, 54).

The pastors and the participants require more time to prepare themselves for the group interaction in an inter-religious forum. The churches and the Christians were not taken into confidence into any dialogue programme, which was so far supposed to be for the leaders and theologians. It is the Lutheran Church under LWF, which has taken courageous step in involving congregations and some individual members in this process. The churches are enthusiastic and supportive; some members are very excited and cooperative. It was a very encouraging sign, and the UELC is getting ready to support the congregations in their efforts and new venture. I feel that the most difficult task for ground work in informing the Churches, forming the groups, setting procedures and the agendas was well taken care of in the last two years and now we can move a step more in seeing the groups in interaction.