



REPORT OF THE LIVING LETTERS VISIT TO INDIA

SEPTEMBER 21-27, 2009

Living Letters are small ecumenical teams visiting a country to listen, learn, share approaches and challenges in overcoming violence and in peace making, and to pray together for peace in the community and in the world. A team consists of 4 - 6 women and men from around the world who have witnessed violence in its various forms and are engaged in working for just peace. A Living Letters team will be successful when those visited can affirm "we are not alone!" - and when team members feel they have received much from those who they visited to encourage.



International Ecumenical Peace Convocation

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STANDING STRONG THROUGH THE STORM – A PILGRIMAGE OF PEACE

Reflections of the Living Letters Team on their visit to India during September 21-27, 2009

In the context of the *Decade to Overcome Violence: churches seeking reconciliation and peace*, a *Living Letters Team* from the World Council of Churches (WCC) visited India during 21-27 September, 2009. The purpose of the Team's visit to India was to learn about the experiences of both violence and overcoming violence, to express solidarity with churches and to encourage one another in the common commitment to find creative ways to overcome violence. The team consisted of: Ms. Karen Burke, Media Officer, Methodist Church in the UK; Ms. Diana Fernandes dos Santos, Methodist Church in Brazil; Mr. Edwin Makue, General Secretary, South Africa Council of Churches; Rev. Dr. Gerard Willemsen, Regional Director for Asia and Europe, Mission Covenant Church of Sweden; Rev. Dr. Deenabandhu Manchala, WCC Programme Executive, Unity, Mission and Spirituality; Mr. Mark Taylor, WCC youth intern, Church of Scotland and the United Reformed Church and Rev. Raj Bharat Patta, National Council of Churches in India (NCCI).

Programme and words of thanks

The Team's visit to India began with a conversation with church leaders on the theme '*Churches' Witness amidst Exclusion and Poverty*' at New Delhi on 21st September, 2009, during which *International Day of Prayer for Peace* was observed. Bishop Dr. Taranath S. Sagar, President, NCCI, Rev. Dr. P.B.M. Basaiawmoit, Vice President, NCCI, Mr. Angelious Michael, Vice President, NCCI, Bishop D.K. Sahu, General Secretary, NCCI and several other church leaders in Delhi attended this conversation. These and other church leaders present there expressed their deep commitment and determination to overcome the violence of caste within and outside the Indian Church today. The Team also had the opportunity to listen to the plights of the Dalits in India, the life experiences on violence against women and the pathetic condition of the *Safai Karmachiris* (manual scavengers). These meetings were facilitated by Mr. Paul Divakar, Ms. Annie Namala and Mr. Bezawada Wilson. An interfaith forum under the auspices of the *Interfaith Coalition for Peace* organized a warm reception for the Team along with the NCCI- Vice President Ms. Sushma Ramaswamy at India Islamic Center with a conversation on issues of interfaith peace initiatives amidst situations of conflict. Thanks to Dr. Zafar Mahmood and Fr. Packiam Samuel for this event. NCCI Delhi office has co-ordinated the programme in Delhi and thanks to Ms. Anjna Masih, Secretary, NCCI - Commission on Policy, Governance and Public Witness and Mr. S. Raju, Administrator, NCCI- Delhi office for their support and help.

The *Living Letters Team* was warmly received by the *Orissa United Christian Forum* led by Bishop Samson Das, Archbishop Raphael Cheenath and Bishop Hruday at Stewart School Conference hall, Bhubaneswar, and explained the role of the Church as victims and also as healers in the recent incidents of violence against Dalit Christians at Kandhamal, Orissa. Ms. Jyotsna Rani Patro, Secretary of the Utkal Christian Council (UCC), organized an evening of sharing experiences on '*Faith and Healing*' to the Team at Berhampur.

The Team visited several sites affected by the conflict, relief camps, schools and churches, to listen to the survivors' experiences. The Team saw for themselves the churches efforts in rebuilding the lives of the people there. Ms. Rama Devi Hansraj of the Catholic Relief Service and Mr. P.K. Sahu from the UCC accompanied the team in visiting the people at their relief camps and their destroyed houses.

The Andhra Pradesh Council of Churches organized a *Living Faiths Meeting* at Ramakrishna Mutt in Hyderabad where the *Living Letters Team* listened to the perspectives of peace and the strategies to overcome violence from people of different faiths. Thanks to Dr. J.A. Oliver, Secretary, APCC, for organizing this meeting as well as for the warm reception he had organized at the Andhra Christian Theological College (ACTC) along with their faculty members and other Church leaders within the city. Thanks to Rev. Dr. NV. Luther Paul, Principal ACTC and their faculty for the sharing in the

evening. Our thanks also are due to Bishop Kanaka Prasad, the newly elected Bishop of the Church of South India's (CSI) Medak Diocese, for giving audience to the team and for hosting a lunch.

The Director of the Henry Martyn Institute, Rev. Dr. Varghese Manimala, explained the interfaith programmes on Conflict Resolution and Peace Building process being implemented by the institute.

The Team also had the privilege of attending a Mission Colloquium organized by the *Collective of Dalit Ecumenical Christian Scholars* (CODECS) and Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College, Hyderabad as a Pre-Edinburgh 2010 event on the theme '*Mission at and from the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives*'. Thanks to Rev. Dr. Joseph Prabhakar & Rev. Dr. Peniel Rufus of CODECS for this event. The visitors also had the opportunity to attend and preach at the worship services at local congregations of Lutheran Church, Methodist Church, CSI Church, and Mennonite Church, to get to know about the lives of the local worshipping communities.

Lessons for the wider ecumenical community

We became more aware of the reality of various forms of violence, especially as we tried to enter into the life-worlds of the Dalits, tribals and women. We have learned that those communities have been the objects of discrimination, exploitation and oppression that is systemic and legitimized. This is found not only in the Hindu communities, but in all of society and even in the churches. Physical violence is just one form of violence against these groups, others are: exclusion; being confined to certain types of jobs; discrimination in the educational system.

Discrimination of certain groups of people is common all over the world but since the disappearance of the apartheid system in South-Africa, it is only in India that we find it in such a systematic way, being integrated in society. The complexity of the caste system in India and more importantly how it militates against our unity as the ONE Body of Christ and the denial that we are all created in the image of God may result in an inability to recognise, affirm and accept the inherent human dignity of the 'other person'. The psychological effects that the trauma of violence and conflicts have on the psyche of children is a major challenge that can best be addressed by religious communities (in general) and the Church of Christ (in particular). While humanitarian relief is very important, we need to realise that our mission as followers of Christ extends way beyond this. We have to seek and engage in processes of healing and reconciliation. In both instances there is a lot that we can learn from the victims and survivors.

As an international community we can learn what the eventual result for a society can be if we do not fight discrimination whenever it occurs. In the end it can become deep rooted and the church is not immune. We have to stay alert even within the church.

We also exposed ourselves to the story of another kind of violence: the violent attacks against thousands of Christians in the Kandhamal district of Orissa in August 2008. These attacks often referred to as persecution by some Christians, is one of the worst that have taken place against Christians in India. Thousands were driven out of their villages and at least 75, probably more, have been killed, often with unspeakable cruelty. These attacks were carefully planned and organised with precision and as such cannot be understood as spontaneous mob reactions. The state government too has been inactive and, according to a number of people, was even supportive.

We have learned this kind of fundamentalism is in fact foreign to Hinduism. Some believe that its aggressive intolerance is a reaction to Muslim and Christian fundamentalism. Our actions as Christians may have a much wider effect than we believe outside of our direct environment. We have to be careful to model a community of love and mutual respect rather than of mistrust and disrespect to the worldwide community.

The events in Orissa also stress the importance of interfaith dialogue, seeking mutual understanding and common grounds and creating relationships. We have seen some good examples of such initiatives. They have to take place not only at leadership levels but also at the grassroots level. Problems with fundamentalism within several religions - even Christianity - are well known in many parts of the world. Fundamentalism tends to be a breeding ground for violence. Whenever it occurs it is the task of the church to initiate dialogue and enhance peace.

At the same time, the meetings with the victims leave behind a feeling of encouragement. It was heartening to meet people who faced horrible atrocities, which they could have avoided by simply denouncing their faith and becoming Hindus, but who stood firm in their faith, testifies to the strength of their faith convictions. It tells us about the inherent strength which they have found in the Christian faith. It gives the Church hope in times when she is threatened - a situation which we cannot know if and when we might encounter it ourselves.

Meaning for the Indian Context

The visit did raise the awareness of the North Indian churches about the WCC. There was a feeling of appreciation at many places we visited. Still, it was felt by some that the churches in the North east India were not part of this visit.

Secularism has challenges within its systems. Religious formations must always be alert to such challenges and guard against being used or even abused by secular ideologies. Existing interfaith dialogues hold great potential for averting violence and conflict and building a sustainable peace. Therefore Christian churches in India should prayerfully pursue dialogue with all religious groups. It is imperative that leaders of such religious groups are visible in their condemnation against any form of discrimination of other faiths and people considered to be of another caste.

The Indian Church should own our Dalit brothers and sisters, their concerns and issues and need to uphold the dignity and respect of these people. The Church in India is not an NGO nor a relief agency but a faith community where solidarity with movements and struggles for justice and equality must take the center stage in all her liturgical, sacramental, homelitical and missiological endeavours. We need to give up exclusive claims as Chosen ones vis-à-vis Gentiles, and need to be all embracing, irrespective of people's religion, region, creed, colour and gender. Churches in India should make similar pilgrimages of peace to conflict ridden areas within India where communities other than Christians are affected. The Church in India should take the character of a movement for it can journey with people in their struggles for liberation and peace.

Specifically with regard to the religious violence in Kandhamal, Orissa, the churches could reflect upon their relationships with the tribal and Hindu peoples in their shared communities. Whilst of course the churches are in no way responsible for the mob violence, murder and destruction of homes and churches, they are responsible for their role in the context of tension in their communities prior to the violence. Archbishop Cheenath in Orissa remarked that we have failed to build relationships with our non-christian neighbours.

Lessons for the home contexts of the team members

India is governed by secular principals encompassing a religiously rich and pluralistic society in which the predominant religion is Hinduism. The Living Letters team experienced some of the ways in which these principles do not always ensure fair treatment of some members of society, i.e. Dalits, tribals, Christians and Muslims. This coupled with religious-extremism led to a point where a religious minority was stigmatised, manifesting itself in the form of violence where the poor attacked the poor, to put it in economic categories. In the terms of caste, the marginalised tribals attacked the excluded Dalits. In Christian terms, humans attacked other humans.

The United Kingdom, and Scotland in particular, is too governed by a secular form of government. A lesson for the Scottish context is that religious-extremism and the stigmatisation of the other can have very serious consequences for religious and cultural minorities. Both Christian religious-extremism and religious and cultural minorities are a part of the current Scottish cultural make-up. How these community groups, both faith-based and secular, interact in the midst of the diversity within Scotland is of the utmost importance. The only way for a pluralistic society to flourish is through tolerance and acceptance of the other, which are opposites of the teachings of religious-extremism. These teachings of intolerance and stigmatisation of the other, in the Indian context, contributed to violence on a large scale. How we explore ways in which to promote tolerance and acceptance is a major challenge for Scottish society.

Those lessons are also applicable in Swedentoo. With an increasing pluralism due to immigration the danger of stigmatization of certain groups, leading to violence, is also increasing.

Regarding the situation of Dalits and tribal peoples, Sweden faces the discrimination of its own indigenous people, the Saami people. The situation in India may stimulate us all the more to work on this issue both in a practical way, banning all forms of discrimination in the church, including in its theological language and formulations.

In appreciating the complexities of the caste system as practised in India we must acknowledge that there are no easy solutions, though everything is possible in Christ. The latter is apparent in how the people affected by violence, the survivors of violent conflict, refused to denounce their faith. They are prepared to lay down their lives, to the glory of God. These survivors need active solidarity, ongoing prayers and support from our home contexts but maybe especially from the South African context. We have to share experiences and processes of combating violence and building sustainable peace, of which South Africa has a unique experience.

Theological Insights from the Visit

The experiences of the Living Letters team have provoked theological reflections especially around the themes of violence, peace and justice. The peace that the bible calls us to practise is not easy. It has certain ingredients that are imperative for its achievement and sustenance. These are:

- Conversion (metanoia) by the perpetrators;
- Demonstrated remorse in healing broken relations;
- Earnest efforts to overcome the causes that work against co-existence and reconciliation- injustice and exploitation; and
- Respect for differences, especially those informed by faith traditions, and understanding on how to live with differences.

We have also come to understand that violence has many forms. We want to emphasise that violence is not only physical but psychological.. On the basis of what we have seen, we want to hold that exclusion, isolation and deprivation of basic needs for livelihood are also different forms of violence.

Reconciliation after experiences of violation and violence is not an easy process. Reconciliation is possible with only when there is confession and willingness to seek and grant forgiveness. Talking about the victims of persecution, we concluded that making the aggressors seek forgiveness is imperative for their healing of memories and of their community relationships. Forgiveness is often one-sided. When forgiveness is not asked for by the perpetrator, the victim is kept captive in the role of the victim and the perpetrator remains unhealed because of his unwillingness to ask and receive forgiveness. Forgiveness is necessary for the restoration of broken relationships. We believe that the relationship between God and humankind which was broken, was restored by Jesus Christ. Therefore, we are called to live out this faith by seeking reconciliation among people and communities. In the specific context of Orissa, restoring relationships is not possible without enabling people to come together. As long as the victims are excluded from the community, as is the case still in many villages in Kandhamal, no relationship to be restored. First, the victims must be allowed to become part of the community again, and it is only then a process of repentance and forgiveness can begin.

Forgiveness is a process that involves not only confession but also restoration and justice. No peace is possible without justice. When Paul in Romans writes about forgiveness, he also writes about the task of the authorities to do justice.

Both violence which is systematized, as in the case of the Dalit and tribal communities, and violence in the form of persecutions as in the case of the Kandhamal district, have a great risk of creating bitterness for the victims. Especially in the case of severe persecution, feelings of wanting revenge are understandable. Revenge will however only lead to more violence and bitterness. Eventually the bitterness might become bitterness towards God, thus in the longer term jeopardizing the victims' faith in a way which the direct persecution did not do. Therefore it is imperative that the government and authorities do justice and bring perpetrators to court. Not for the sake of revenge, but for the sake of justice and peace, in order to prevent acts of revenge.

We must respect and celebrate differences – religion, culture, language, etc. By advocating and practising a theology of inclusion, we promote peace and goodwill among people.

Conclusion

We conclude our report with a challenge to all to pray for the churches in India, for the oppressed and the marginalized as well as for the victims of violence. We also challenge each person reading this to take the lessons from this visit and this report to their own context.

May the peace of the Lord be with you all.

In Christ,

Edwin Makue, Gerard Willemsen, Karen Burke, Diana Fernandes dos Santos, Mark Taylor, Deenabandhu Manchala and Raj Bharat Patta.

Reflections of Receiving Communities

Rama Devi Hansraj

Catholic Relief Service

“It was my pleasure to accompany you guys to the district. It was a great learning for me as well... I was in fact moved at the reactions of the team that visit and the attention that they paid for every small conversation. For me, living letters concept is amazing... creation of such platforms for learning is key for solidarity movements and I am touched with the very concept of it. This visit helped to interact with the team and share their experience with similar situations in the other parts of the world... over all it gave me lot of solace and satisfaction. I hope I have represented the issues to best of my knowledge and this will help us find and initiate some steps forward to improve the situation of our people.

Thanks again. I will look forward to read more articles.”

Angelius Michael

Vice President, National Council of Churches in India

“It was indeed a great pleasure to have you and the the living letter team in our midst. We appreciated this visit of yours expressing solidarity with Indian churches as we live in the midst of poverty and social exclusion.

I believe we had a good deliberation, but I am concerned of the fact that it could have been a little longer instead of half a day only...

... I also take the opportunity to thank each one of the members of the living letter team for having visited us. We look forward to your prayer and concern.”

Packiam T. Samuel

General Secretary, Inter Faith Coalition for Peace (ICP)

“I am not mincing words when we say a big “Thank You” for bringing ‘Living letters’ team to visit ICP’s Delhi Interfaith forum. You have done a splendid job. The whole forum simply liked you and is full of appreciation for you.

The visit was very useful and the objectives met far beyond our expectations. I am happy that you toiled behind the scenes in spite of busy schedule. Now we are on the right track and we simply need to move.

A lot of follow up is necessary. I will share with you all our suggestions and we need to strengthen the ties between ICP New Delhi and the Churches. You will have to continue to facilitate this link. The reward for good work is more work!!

Be assured of our prayers for all God’s Blessings on all your endeavours.”

Prasant Kumar Sahu
Bhubaneswar, Orissa

Your visit was... enriching, the people of Orissa were very pleased with efforts of the WCC Living Letters team. The concern for the distressed people of Orissa by the WCC was appreciated by the people. Coming all the way to Orissa and experiencing the sufferings of the people in Orissa was a soothing endeavour.

Looking forward for the unfailing support of the WCC in times to come for the people of Orissa.

Links to Further Information and Photos

Decade to overcome Violence Website

<http://www.overcomingviolence.org/>

Press from the Living Letters India visit

<http://www.overcomingviolence.org/en/peace-convocation/living-letters-visits/india.html>

[http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=1724&L=&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=13454&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=1634](http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=1724&L=&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=13454&tx_ttnews[backPid]=1634)

[http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=1724&L=&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=13436&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=1634](http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=1724&L=&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=13436&tx_ttnews[backPid]=1634)

[http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=1724&L=&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=13497&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=1634](http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=1724&L=&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=13497&tx_ttnews[backPid]=1634)

Photos from the Living Letters India visit

<http://www.overcomingviolence.org/en/news-and-events/photos/visit-to-india.html>