

Breaking New Ground in Inter-Faith Relations in Sri Lanka

Methodist Mission Partner James Rowley met with the Reverend Anura Perera, a leading figure in the Inter-Religious Peace Foundation in Sri Lanka.

While the war between the Sri Lankan Army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) quite rightly grabs headlines locally and overseas, very little attention is given to peace initiatives either at the national or grassroots level. Sri Lanka is a deeply divided society along both religious and ethnic grounds, and although the war is the clearest present manifestation of this, many local disputes can easily arise.

The Reverend Anura Perera, the Superintendent Minister of the Kandy Methodist Circuit, manages to combine his circuit duties with work at the national level for the Inter-Religious Peace Foundation, of which he is a founder member. The IRPF is a unique because it is run by representatives of all the major religions on the island, namely, Buddhism (followed by about 70% of the population), Hinduism (~15%), Islam (~8%) and Christianity (~7%). It organises symposia for religious leaders around the country from which local action is planned, and encourages 16-18 year old students with different ethnic and religious backgrounds to meet, talk and play together regularly. The IRPF also has a Rapid Response Unit that hastens to places where inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflict occurs. For example, the Unit rushed to Trincomalee in 2005 when a Buddhist statue erected overnight in a predominantly Tamil area provoked rioting.

“Dialogue is much more than just attending each other’s events. We must be together, talk and eat together – and listen well,” says Rev’d Anura, who has a MPhil in Peace Studies from Dublin. Kandy is a useful place for Rev’d Anura to be because it is the spiritual home of Sri Lankan Buddhism whose followers are all from the Sinhalese ethnic group who form 72% of the population.

Recently Rev’d Anura, himself Sinhalese, organised a unique meeting between the “main line” churches (i.e. Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians and the Salvation Army) and an influential group of anti-Christian Buddhist monks, academics and professionals. The meeting was very difficult to arrange because of suspicion of the Christians’ motives. However, a time and venue were eventually agreed by Rev’d Anura and Missaka Kamalasiri, a monk who is the International Relations Co-ordinator of the JHU political party, an extreme Sinhalese Buddhist Party that is part of the national governing coalition. The Buddhist group presented evidence concerning the three main issues about Christianity in Sri Lanka that disturbed them.

Firstly, the Buddhists pointed out that the many new small free churches in the Kandy area are accountable to no-one, unlike the mainline churches. If the pastor, who actively seeks converts often using material inducements, behaves insensitively, who can the local Buddhist monk complain to? Upset locals can take things into their own hands. Christian behaviour perceived as extreme leads to extreme responses.

Secondly, it was felt that Christianity is not spreading a religion but is trying to establish a new political order. President Bush's invasion of Iraq and Condoleezza Rice's comments about attacks on Sri Lankan churches were cited. The government's removal of International NGOs (except the Red Cross) from the northern war areas is symptomatic of this feeling. Aren't most INGOs from Christian countries? Aren't the INGOs usually sympathetic to the LTTE terrorists who want to change the political order by splitting up Sri Lanka?

Thirdly, there is a crisis in Buddhist Temples due to people asking monks for material things in the same way that churches provide material things, e.g. dry rations at Christmas. This reverses the ancient Buddhist tradition of giving alms to monks and reflects the materialization of religion which, according to the Buddhist group, is a spiritual matter alone.

The meeting was a very friendly one, and Rev'd Anura and Missaka Kamalasinghe are met again at JHU Headquarters in Colombo when Rev'd Anura presented a report from the meeting. The meeting also showed how little both sides knew of each other. The Buddhist group learned that there are many churches with long traditions in Sri Lanka. The churches learned more of the feelings behind the government's long-delayed Anti-Conversion Bill. Even without the bill being law, life can be difficult for Christians, for example, when dealing with government offices, schools and even hospitals. "You can't prove it," says Rev'd Anura, "But you can feel it." The bill in its current form may, he says, be easily misused to cause problems for all Christians, not just the extreme ones.

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