

# Dhaka Statement on Interfaith Diapraxis

*“I sought my soul, but my soul I could not see,  
I sought my God, but my God eluded me,  
I sought my neighbor and I found all three.”*

*[As quoted by Dr Dennis D. Datta]*

## **Preamble**

### **Introduction**

Forty-eight representatives from religious communities in Asia (Buddhist, Christians - member churches of The Lutheran World Federation/ecumenical partners, Hindus and Muslims) involved in interfaith-dialogue and interfaith Diapraxis gathered in Bangladesh from 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> September 2009 for a “Consultation on Interfaith Diapraxis: Building Communities of Solidarity and Mutual Interest across Faith Boundaries.” The Consultation was hosted by Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) Bangladesh in cooperation with local Lutheran churches (Bangladesh Lutheran Church and Bangladesh Northern Lutheran Church) at the BRAC Center for Development Management in Rajendrapur, near Dhaka.

The consultation was organized by The Lutheran World Federation Department for Mission and Development (DMD) Asia Desk and the coordinating desk for the Asian Regional Expression of the LWF. It can be seen as a follow up of the previous consultation “Dialogue in Life” held in 2006 in Medan and is in line with the LWF “programmatic goals” under the Priority Area 2: Deepen ecumenical commitment and foster interfaith relations.” Participants were from different religious backgrounds coming from Bangladesh, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Jordan/Palestine, Korea, Nepal, Thailand and LWF staff.

The consultation commenced with an opening ceremony engaging different representatives from the different religions. Readings from the Holy Bible and the Holy Qur'an together with prayers from Baha'i, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim traditions were shared. By doing this the participants reaffirmed their respective faiths in order to build relationships across faith boundaries.

Bangladesh is one of the world's most populous countries (around 150 million) and also a densely populated one. It remains one of the poorest countries in Asia (ranking around 140<sup>th</sup> out of countries in terms of Human Development Index). The country is religiously conservative, where rural society predominates. The major religions the people of Bangladesh follow are Islam (87%), Hinduism (10%), Buddhism (1%) and Christianity (0.4%).

### **Definition**

*“Diapraxis: dialogue in action, where people of diverse faiths come together and engage themselves to resolve issues of common concern and to pave the way for transformation.” (Dhaka Consultation on Interfaith Diapraxis)*

## **Objectives**

The plenum received orientation on the consultation with a briefing on the background of the consultation and its objectives as they are:

- To reflect on and affirm as an interfaith gathering the importance of religious freedom in any process of assuring peaceful coexistence on community and national level.
- Agreement is reached on which basic requirements conditions may lead to situation that religious freedom becomes a constructive element in any inter-communal relationship.
- A common 'theological' basis is discerned and basic consensus is agreed for interfaith diapraxis and inter-communal development.
- A strategic concept and approach is developed and to some extent elaborated for work within communities, so that solidarity will be promoted and realized in any interreligious contexts.
- A framework and an approach for religious leadership models start to be developed so that religious leaders are seen to endorse initiatives in inter-faith cooperation. (“start to be developed” is used to express that only first steps can be made). In the process areas for training and capacity development are identified.

This was followed by introductory remarks on the program process and an introduction to LWF study programs on inter-religious relationships.

## **Case Stories on Diapraxis**

### ***For Religious Freedom***

*In 2007 a Christian community in Indonesia received from a local government office a permission letter to build a new church building. Two years later, in March 2009, the same local government cancelled the letter of permission and stopped the building process based on an appeal and protest from hard-line groups within the community.*

*As this was seen as an illegal act and a violation of human rights, an interfaith coalition of religious leaders together with some neutral adviser's from within the community gathered spontaneously and went to the local government office to protest against this act. The matter could not be solved on the administrative level, yet the congregation keeps on constructing the building under the accompaniment and advocacy of the interfaith coalition.*

*(Source: A participant from Indonesia)*

## **Input from the Floor**

To lay the foundation for the consultation on interfaith diapraxis, LWF Deputy General Secretary Rev. Chandran Paul Martin gave the key note address titled “Freedom of Religions and Recognition of Others.” He said:

*“The demand ‘to Love God and neighbor’ is Gospel, and all rest is just commentary. How do you love your neighbor when your home is attacked and when bombs are falling all around you? How do you love your neighbor who keeps you in bondage and servitude using social, political and other ideological affirmations for centuries?*

*Does not this recognition also include the prophetic voice of justice? To be prophetic in society is being in solidarity.”*

Four speakers then presented their views on the theme from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Muslim perspectives, as an affirmation to the concept of interfaith dialogue and interfaith diapraxis.

*“Buddhist teaching and practices have a tendency to support the nature of diapraxis in the sense of 'deep listening' through the practice of 'mindfulness' in meditation both in 'traditional meditation' and 'meditation in action'.”*

Dr Parichart Suwanbubha

*“Christ invested in people, built them up so that they could be agents of transformation of this world into a place where God's love, peace and justice would prevail. ‘So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.’”*

Rev. Martin Adhikary

*“Hindus believe that building communities of solidarity and mutual interest across faith boundaries characterized by justice and sustainable development accompanied by ecological awareness is possible only through consensus and concerted activity which is impossible without successful interfaith diapraxis in Asian countries.”*

Dr Prabhakar Bhattacharyya

*“A Muslim can never be communal in the narrow sense of the term, because according to the Quran, he has to treat all humankind as one single nation and he has to view the humanhood of humankind, and he has to look at all others as part of a universal humanhood.”*

Prof. M. Shamsheer Ali

This affirmation was of a common understanding on interfaith diapraxis was widened by LWF Vice President Bishop Dr Munib A. Younan through his comments on the “Role of religious leaders in enhancing commitment to respect and value people of diverse faiths.” Religious leaders must use the power of religion to speak truth to power and promote justice in their societies and the world. The prophetic leader does not seek to please the powerful or maintain the status quo.

Besides religious affirmation on diapraxis, some governments have begun to recognize the importance of diapraxis as a meaningful way of living. Here is a case story from India.

### ***Women's Interfaith Journey***

*In 2006 the Indian Government and a mandate given by the religious leaders of India called to form an Interfaith Coalition for Peace as a government-funded organization. Besides the ongoing challenge to develop a doctrinal base for this interfaith endeavor several actions have been initiated. One is the Women's Interfaith Journey. A group of women were sent to travel to the most sensitive and troubled regions in India. After their journey the women gathered to share their experiences which were later on shared with a wider audience to improve the understanding of the conflicts. The*

*outcome of this journey has been the formation of an Interfaith Women's Coalition. This coalition today functions as a network across the country to enhance the solidarity of women across faith boundaries. It also is an expression of the deep concern for peace within religious communities in the country, which has been recognized by the government.*

*(Source: Interfaith Coalition for Peace, India)*

## **Recommendations**

After a series of deliberations and interactions the Consultation put forth the following recommendations in order to make diapraxis an integral part of lifestyle across faith boundaries:

### **To faith communities**

1. Faith communities should actively disseminate their experiences of interfaith diapraxis to the people at large so that religious freedom is a cause of common concern. Advocacy for human rights at the local, national and international levels should be at the core of the diapraxis process.
2. Faith communities should develop and abide by a mutually accepted Code of Conduct that seeks to ensure communal solidarity.
3. Religious and other community leaders should take responsibility for promoting diapraxis as a vehicle for interfaith relationship.
4. The faith communities should develop methodologies on interfaith diapraxis in their educational institutions.
5. Faith communities should actively mobilize their information portals to convey the perspectives and good practices of diapraxis. They should bring positive stories of diapraxis to the attention of the media

### **To LWF**

6. LWF should take a prompt action in order to develop the Code of Conduct (No. 2).
7. LWF should facilitate the process of education in diapraxis by developing a manual (No. 4).
8. LWF should establish a networking platform in Asia (e.g. Inter-Faith Action for Peace in Africa - IPAFA) for initiating, sharing and exchanging good practices of diapraxis.
9. LWF should continue the consultation process on interfaith dialogue and diapraxis started in Medan/Indonesia 2006 and continued in Dhaka/Bangladesh 2009 for the Asian region

## **To governments and global bodies**

10. The UN and government(s), along with religious and community leaders, must engage faith communities for bringing about justice, peace and reconciliation in crisis-affected areas in Asia, especially political solution to the Palestine-Israel conflict, justice for Jerusalem, justice for Dalits and other oppressed communities such as ethnic, tribal and minority groups in Bangladesh and other countries in Asia.
11. International and national non-governmental organizations and faith communities must unite for diapraxis so that issues—such as poverty eradication, disaster management, education, health, climate change, disarmament, advocacy and others—become common concerns for the people of different faiths.

## **To the media**

12. The media should play a responsible role in disseminating various kinds of information related to diapraxis and lay more emphasis on the positive effects of interfaith dialogue and interfaith diapraxis.

## **Commitment and Appeal**

### ***Parable of Diapraxis***

*Leaders from all religious groups were sent to hell and heaven for an exploration trip. When they landed in hell, they saw tables filled with plenty of food to eat. Nevertheless the people they met were all very thin. The visiting leaders asked why they were all very thin even though there was plenty of food on the tables. They received the following answer: “Yes, you are right. We have plenty of food. The problem is that we are only allowed to eat it with spoons, which are so long that we are unable to feed ourselves.” The group went on to heaven and found the same picture: tables filled with plenty of food to eat. Unlike in hell, the people in heaven were well fed and enjoyed their life. When they enquired as to how they were all so well fed and enjoyed life, the group received the following answer: “Even though we have to eat with these long spoons we have discovered that we just have to help and feed each other in order to be fed!”*

*(A third, but hopefully not the last story)*

### **Commitment**

As an act of realization of diapraxis, the participants of this Consultation commit themselves to implementing the recommendations in their respective working areas.

### **Appeal**

“Let us call upon all religious and community leaders, governments and global bodies to make faith communities a driving force for justice, peace, life, solidarity, tolerance, coexistence and reconciliation.”