



## Listening to and Learning from Asia's Pain

### Interfaith Relations Newsletter

Rev. Dr. Shanta Premawardhana  
Associate General Secretary for Interfaith Relations

**B**uilding Communities of Peace for All was the theme of the 12th General Assembly of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA). A 13 member delegation from the NCC participated in the Assembly in Chiang Mai, Thailand this April. Our main task was to listen and learn, we said, and find ways to stand in solidarity with Asian Christians. Every day we sat with at least two delegations to hear their needs, concerns and insights. Following the Assembly, a part of our delegation visited Indonesia while another visited Sri Lanka. This was my second trip to Sri Lanka after the tsunami. Several documents, including a bulletin insert, church guidelines, reports and recommendations from those visits are found on the NCC website: [www.nccusa.org](http://www.nccusa.org).

If Asia experienced a "loud" tsunami on December 26<sup>th</sup>, they've experienced many "silent" tsunamis. Asian Christians live in the context of poverty, ethnic conflicts, religious persecution, wars, a burgeoning AIDS epidemic and the residual effects of centuries of colonial domination. Asian Christianity, an ancient and mature tradition, always existed in the context of religious plurality. For centuries they've had to theologially struggle with the awareness that among Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and other religious people, there are deeply devout, spiritually mature, ethically exemplary women and men who can be deemed saintly by any measure. Asian Christianity has much to teach us about how to be Christians in a pluralistic environment. Hence our theme: Listening to and Learning from Asia's Pain.



*Dr. Richard Dauley, General Secretary of the Indonesian Council of Churches (PGI) making a presentation to Dr. Rushdie Ali Mohammad, President of the State Institute of Islamic Studies in Banda Aceh. As a gesture of goodwill, PGI donated a truck load of relief supplies and four water pumps to this school which lost half of its 4000 students to the tsunami. On the right is Dr. Andreas Yewangoe, President of PGI.*

### What Asian Church Leaders are Saying Following the Tsunami....

- **Ecumenical and Interfaith Tensions Increase**

Funds from church related relief organizations often come with denominational branding. Although Indonesia and Sri Lanka's minority Christian populations would prefer to work ecumenically, this subtle competitiveness inhibits such cooperation, say Asian church leaders.

Evangelical groups' use of the tsunami as an evangelistic opportunity has exacerbated already existing interfaith tensions. When a team from Antioch Community Church of Waco, TX did a children's ministry in Sri Lanka and when Virginia-based World Help tried to adopt 300 Indonesian Muslim children to raise them Christian, they were seen as preying upon the most vulnerable.

During the past 20 years large numbers of Evangelical Christians have poured into Asia as business leaders, English teachers, computer programmers and such, while working covertly as evangelists. This has created a backlash of violence against churches and pastors. The Sri Lankan government is expected to pass an "Anti-Conversion Bill" which significantly curtails religious freedom.

- **Building Community is Top Priority**

When there is community, people show remarkable resilience in bouncing back from disasters. The tsunami destroyed and displaced entire families and communities. The best contribution US churches can make is to help build community. This will create conditions that are necessary for healing to take place, say Christian Conference of Asia leaders.

This means that all rebuilding efforts must be people-centered. They must be based on fairness, transparency, and integrity; that projects must be inclusive to insure that people of all faiths, ethnicities and political leanings are treated with equal respect; that preferential options must be given to the most vulnerable; and integration between ecology, health, and development must be ensured. We should also work for spiritual empowerment, from conflict to solidarity to healing and reconciliation.

*Contd. on page 3*

## AAR Invites Us to Organize a Special Topics Forum

The American Academy of Religion (AAR) has invited the Interfaith Relations Commission to organize a Special Topics Forum on Christian Theology's engagement with Religious Pluralism and explore its implications for theological education.

At last November's AAR meeting in San Antonio, 22 theologians, concerned that most pastors currently practicing their ministry, don't know how to relate to people of different faiths, gathered for an informal conversation.

Participants agreed that only a few seminaries take interfaith relations seriously and address it as part of the theology curriculum. It is time that Theology as a discipline located itself in the context of other religious plurality. The participants agreed to seek a venue in the AAR's program to formalize the discussion.

In addition, we've also been invited to contribute to a special issue of the Wabash Center journal "Teaching Theology and Religion" on the formation of religious leaders in the different religious traditions. A panel of writers representing several religious traditions have already begun work on this. We expect this issue to be published in April 2006.

We are also working on a Continuing Education project for Christian clergy that we hope to be able to take to various communities around the country.

Special thanks to Drs. Kathy Talvacchia and Lucinda Mosher for helping organize this initiative.

## Interfaith Dialogue Training

The first pilot event of the Interfaith Dialogue Training Program was held March 11 and 12, in Columbus, OH. Co-sponsored by the Interfaith Council of Central Ohio, 22 participants from 7 religious communities participated. Following the 2 day experiential training the participants continued to meet every other week for six more times to sharpen their dialogical skills. Our special thanks go out to Rev. Les Stansbury, Dr. Tarunjit Butalia, Dr. Ma'ani and many others in Columbus who helped organize this event.

### Goals of Dialogue Training

#### Learn how to:

1. **listen without thinking of what to say next**
2. **appreciate others' beliefs**
3. **suspend judgment**
4. **be self-critical about your own beliefs**
5. **be aware of insights arising from the dialogue.**

The next pilot event will be held in Queens, NY at the Bishop Molloy Retreat House (86-45 Edgerton Blvd. Jamaica) on May 25 and 26 (9:00 a.m.—4:00 p.m. each day) and will be co-sponsored by the Queens Federation of Churches.

Our special thanks go out to Rev. Skip L'Heureax and Dr. Lucinda Mosher for their work to organize this. To see a flyer and register online please go to: [www.queenschurches.org](http://www.queenschurches.org)

We expect to be able to take this initiative to many local communities across the country from this fall onwards.

The trainer, Jeffrey Spahn of Leaders Leading Leaders of Chicago, an institute that specializes in diversity training, received his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago Divinity School.



*A Buddhist Temple in Galle, Sri Lanka stands in the midst of the tsunami rubble*

## Jewish-Christian Dialogue Continues

Despite challenges brought about by the Presbyterian Church (USA) resolution to study phased selective divestment from corporations that do business in the State of Israel, the Jewish-Christian Dialogue table begun last year continues.

Representatives of NCC member communions and mainstream Jewish organizations, will gather next on May 13th in Washington DC. There are two main agenda items:

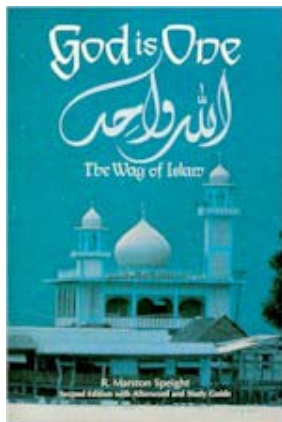
- A joint trip to the Middle East now scheduled for September 17-23, and
- A proposal to expand the dialogue table by encouraging the leaders of the Commissions, Boards and Committees of our organizations to come to similar dialogue tables.

We will also engage in a continuing discussion of ground rules of our conversation and how we speak to each other, our constituents and the media.

Following several years of a University of Chicago Divinity School sponsored consultation, Jewish and Christian scholars and leaders issued a very helpful document entitled: "What we have learned from each other: A Report on a Jewish-Protestant Conversation about the Israel-Palestinian Conflict." The document is available at: <http://www-news.uchicago.edu/releases/05/050505.conversation.pdf>

## New Opportunities in Muslim—Christian Relations

God Is One: The Way of Islam, written by retired United Methodist minister Marston Speight is a primer on Islam for Christians. It was re-published in 2001, following 9/11, with a study guide for churches, written by Jay Rock, Director of Interfaith Relations at the Presbyterian Church (USA) and my predecessor at the NCC.



Having received significant affirmation from the Muslim community, we have formed a partnership with Islamic Society of North America and Hartford Seminary to encourage churches to use this book in Adult Education groups.

Participating churches will send their leader/s to a day-long training conducted by Hartford professors who are themselves Muslims.

A part of the six week curriculum is meeting Muslim persons and visiting a local mosque. ISNA will prepare the mosques to receive Christian visi-

tors. Discover Islam Foundation will provide resource materials to churches that undertake to participate in the project.

The project aims to:

- Increase the knowledge of Islam among Christians
- Improve Christians' attitude towards Muslims
- Explore church-mosque relationships

The next training is scheduled for Saturday, June 18th at Hartford Seminary. In the early fall we will have another training in New York. We are hoping to have at least 40 churches doing study groups this fall.

## Muslim-Christian Dialogue Planned

A Muslim-Christian Dialogue Table similar to the present Jewish-Christian Dialogue, involving Ecumenical and Interfaith officers of our Communion and representatives of Islamic organizations is being planned.

Since the Christians who will sit at both tables are likely to be the same, we expect that there will be significant cross-fertilization between the two tables. As we have asserted to our Jewish colleagues that the dialogue needs to include Muslims, we are hopeful that over a period of time the two tables might merge.

ISNA will invite participants to the dialogue table that represent the variety of Islamic traditions. We expect that this dialogue table will begin shortly after Ramadan, this November.

## ISNA Invites Christian Leaders to Convention

We have received a warm invitation from the Islamic Society of North America to bring an ecumenical group of Christian leaders to the 42nd Annual Convention of ISNA to be held over the Labor Day weekend at the Rosemont Convention Center in Chicago.

The annual ISNA convention draws about 35,000 people including Muslim leaders from around the country and around the world.

Participants will be welcome to:

- attend all plenary sessions and workshops
- visit the bazaar, where more than 500 publishers, charitable and advocacy organizations, sellers of religious articles, etc. have booths
- observe Muslim prayers in the conference prayer hall
- meet and talk with American Muslims of all ages, and many cultural and ethnic backgrounds
- gather for prayer, reflection, raise questions, discuss insights and ideas,
- talk with invited Muslim leaders and speakers
- relax or meet in the seminar room during the day

Please call or email Deidre Lee for registration information.

## What Asian Church Leaders are Saying Following the Tsunami (Contd. from p. 1)

### Sister Church Partnerships

These are intended for the long term and to benefit both partners. In the short term, Asian churches need relief. In the long term, US partners will learn new ways of being Christian, particularly in the context of religious plurality.

Relationships between families, pastors and other professionals within the church family, such as doctors, teachers and business leaders can be established. US churches can encourage local schools, hospitals, businesses, and community organizations to build relationships with corresponding institutions in Asia.

Relationships are now being formed. For example: Riverside Church in New York City is sending a team to explore partnership in Sri Lanka, and Hanover College in Indiana is exploring a relationship with the State Institute of Islamic Studies in Banda Aceh (see picture on p.1).

## Prithipura Children's Home: Sri Lanka's Premier Interfaith Venture



*These salvaged wheel chairs were being cleaned. But most of them had to be discarded*

Prithipura (City of Joy) Home for Differently-Abled Children was started by Rev. Bryan de Kretser, a Presbyterian Minister, as an interfaith venture. To date, its Board comprises Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Christian religious leaders and is still the premier interfaith venture in Sri Lanka. Presently, 85 children whose mental age is 0-8 are resident there, although the biological age of the oldest resident is 44.

On December 26, 2004, tsunami waters covered the entire premises with over four feet of muddy water from the nearby lagoon, destroying beds, furniture, wheel chairs, refrigerators, washing machines and vegetation on the entire property. The people in the nearby village came quickly and helped remove the children to safety. They stayed in another facility until their home was cleaned up and ready again.

On March 28th when an earthquake struck Indonesia and tsunami warnings were issued in Sri Lanka, they had to evacuate the children again, this time in the middle of the night.

Now they are considering building a second floor to a portion of the existing building, as a safe place for evacuating the children. Their greatest need at the moment is to raise funds for this project. If you'd like to support this interfaith venture, you may send your contribution to the address below indicating that it is for the Tsunami relief and designated to Prithipura.

### An Interfaith/Peace Build for Sri Lanka: A New Partnership

A new opportunity for a partnership between Habitat for Humanity International, National Council of Churches, USA/Church World Service, Habitat for Humanity Sri Lanka and the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka is emerging.

The partnership proposes building 100 houses near the city of Galle, in the model of Habitat's Interfaith/Peace Builds, in which, volunteers both from different religious communities and from conflicted groups will come together to build houses. Habitat has observed that bringing people together to put a hammer to nail in

building a house for someone else creates opportunities for new relationships that would otherwise be impossible.

In the Sri Lankan context, the partners will bring together Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Christian participants as well as volunteers who are Sinhalese and Tamil.

We are hoping that this project will get underway this summer. US churches will also be able to send work-groups to assist in the building of houses in Sri Lanka. Please call or email Deidre Lee for further information.

#### Contact Us...

Rev. Dr. Shanta Premawardhana  
Associate General Secretary for Interfaith Relations  
Phone: 212-870-2560  
Fax: 212-870-2817  
E-mail: [shanta@nccusa.org](mailto:shanta@nccusa.org)

Ms. Deidre Lee  
Administrative Assistant  
Phone: 212-870-3403  
Email: [dlee@nccusa.org](mailto:dlee@nccusa.org)

National Council of the Churches, USA  
475 Riverside Drive #880  
New York, NY 10115

Website: [www.nccusa.org](http://www.nccusa.org)

#### Interfaith Relations Commission

The Interfaith Relations Commission, comprising representatives from the NCC's 36 communions and invited members, meets twice a year to help coordinate this work.

At our meeting in February in St. Petersburg, Fla. we began to think through what it means for us to "Listen to and Learn from Asia's Pain." We also heard from representatives of the Council for American Islamic Relations (CAIR) Tampa chapter about the impact of the USA PATRIOT act on Muslims living in the US, including the particular case of Dr. Sami Al-Aryan, a former Florida State University professor imprisoned without legal representation. We agreed that we encourage Christians to stand in solidarity with Muslims and speak out against such injustices.

Our next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, Sept. 15-Saturday, Sept. 17, 2005 at the University of Chicago Divinity School in Chicago.