

SCHOOL OF PEACE 2006 FINAL ACTIVITY REPORT

1. Background to 2006 SOP

The idea of setting up the School of Peace (SOP) was first suggested during a brainstorming session in Prapat, North Sumatera, Indonesia during the first Inter-religious Consultation in 2003. Following this consultation the Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) was established to carry on the movement. As the ICF slowly begin to take shape following this initial consultation, the possibility of developing the SOP continued to be raised. In 2004, two workshops were held by ICF, one focusing on gender and the other focusing on youth as peacemakers. The participants of both of these workshops suggested future activities similar to the SOP.

In 2005 the Working Committee of ICF identified SOP as a major activity to be organized and carried out in 2006. The aim of SOP would be designed to *encourage young people from around Asia to become agents of transformation in the task of building interfaith and interethnic cultures and communities of justpeace.*

Three objectives were established to govern the SP program:

- * encourage individual transformation
- * encourage the development of a national strategy for justpeace through local action
- * encourage the development of a regional strategy for justpeace advocacy

With this aim and these objectives in mind, the ICF Working Committee met to further develop the concept and to work on an appropriate approach and curriculum.

2. Curriculum Development

After initial curriculum planning via email, the Working Committee and the Organizers met in Bangalore India the first week of February 2005 to put together some ideas for the curriculum based on the aim and objectives of the SOP as earlier agreed upon. The meeting took place on the Visthar campus and was also attended by David Selvaraj, Director of Visthar, C.F. John, Mercy Kappen and Rustom Barucha. During the discussions, the focus of the three SOP modules was agreed upon and a lengthy list of issues each module was to address was brainstormed.

Following this meeting, the coordinator spent time consolidating the various ideas for the curriculum, and in July he traveled again to Visthar to work out the details with the Visthar staff. The three days of discussions resulted in a well-developed curriculum, time line, expectations and a list of potential resource persons.

After further email exchanges with Working Committee members, the curriculum was set and the process of inviting resource persons and participants began.

3. SOP schedule and process

Based on the aim and objectives and the curriculum, a process was created that would allow for an action/reflection progression of learning and sharing. The curriculum and daily activities were also designed to help participants investigate and expand their personal self-identity. Through interaction with each other, with resource persons and through group activities, the participants were urged to find the courage to accept challenge from others as well as the strength to challenge their own religious, political, economic and social “comfort zones”. Personal transformation begins when we dare to leave our “comfort zones”, experiencing new things and placing ourselves in situations which leave us vulnerable and exposed. Perhaps the most difficult comfort zone to venture out of is our religious faith comfort zone, but finding the courage to question our faith, or have others question it, does not mean to reject it. Rather it provides us with the opportunity to understand it in much deeper and more relevant ways so that we can join with those of other faiths in building communities of justpeace.

The first session of the day began at 9:00am and ended at 1:00pm when the group broke for lunch. Afternoon sessions started at 2:00pm and usually ended around 4:30pm when the participants worked off their mental fatigue with a rousing game of volleyball. Evenings were devoted to journal and report writing, study groups, films and relaxation. The study groups were made up of four members each and met to discuss specific questions prepared by the coordinator based on the day’s sessions.

Each morning started with one participant sharing an experience with marginalized people that inspired them or helped them clarify their personal vision for the future. Through this sharing all thoughts were focused on the lives, struggles and suffering of the marginalized in our societies so that the day’s sessions might place these people in the center of our learning. This was followed with sharing of any important items from the participants’ countries or communities. Then the report of the previous day’s activities/discussions was read and corrections made. Each day two people volunteered to take notes of all discussions and activities which they typed up and made available to the group. This became our daily diary for the School of Peace.

At the request of the group, interfaith prayer was added to our morning’s opening sessions. Each day one Hindu, one Christian and one Muslim began the session with a brief prayer or song of meditation.

Following this morning ritual, discussions related to the modules began. Each of the three modules lasted approximately one month. The first three days of the module were devoted to introducing the theme for the module through games, films and discussions with local resource persons. As a field visit was integrated into each module, the first three days were also designed to prepare participants to utilize the field visit in the most effective and appropriate way.

After the initial three-day introduction to the module, the participants were divided into three groups. Each group spent up to ten days in a particular field experience designed to

help them reflect on the theme of the module. All field visits were in the areas of marginalized and oppressed communities.

Upon returning from the field visit, each group had one day to create a report on their experiences, using creative means such as drama, photographs, songs, pantomimes, etc. The following day the group reports were presented and a summary of the main issues raised for further discussion.

Then international and local resource persons spent three days with the participants in a debriefing and consolidation process, helping them work at internalizing the learnings of the module and their experiences in the field and seek deeper understanding of the issues so they could relate them back to their own communities and work.

To conclude the module, each participant was given two days to reflect on their learnings during the entire module and write a two to three page essay. These essays were to be introspective, describing what the participants had learned about themselves and their societies during the module. Were they able to step out of their comfort zones? Were they able to move from tolerance of others who are different to acceptance and then on to engagement? They were also asked to relate their learnings back to their own communities and work environment in practical and creative ways. The essays were then shared during the final two days of the module.

According to the original plan, the weekends were to be free, but Saturdays were often used for English classes during which participants took an in-depth look at terminology used in the discussions on politics, economics and community organizing.

In summary, the schedule of each module looked like this:

DAYS	SCHEDULE ITEM	NOTES
3 days	Introduction to the theme of the module	Games, films and discussions led by local resource persons
10 days	Immersion and encounter in the field	Three groups in three different areas
1 day	Preparation of group presentations	
1 day	Group presentations on the field visit	Using creative means to share the learnings
3days	Debriefing and consolidation	Guided by international resource persons with experience on the theme
2 days	Essay writing	Reflective and introspective
2 days	Sharing essays	Sharing of personal growth, transformation and learning

At the end of the third module, participants were asked to prepare a work plan for integrating all of their learnings from the School of Peace back into their work at the local level in their communities, particularly focusing on how to work more closely and

effectively with those considered outcastes or “untouchables” in our societies. These plans were shared with the group as the final presentation of the School of Peace. The work plans were not meant to be new projects requiring a new structure and budget, but rather how the learnings could become a significant part of the participant’s organization and work involvement.

Twenty participants were invited from six countries including Nepal, India (Manipur and Kashmir), Sri Lanka, Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand. All applicants had to be recommended by a local organization which also promised to help participants apply their learnings once they completed the SOP.

Of the twenty participants invited, one declined at the last moment in order to pursue higher education and three were denied visas to India. Of the sixteen participants who finally arrived at the SOP, three were of the Hindu faith, six were Christian and seven were Muslim. Seven men and nine women made up the participants.

To assist the participants as they struggled with the issues of injustice and confronted their comfort zones, each was assigned a mentor with whom they could meet during the three and a half months to discuss any questions they had or issues that were emerging. The mentors were David Selvaraj, Mercy Kappan and Max Ediger.

On May 4 the closing ceremony was held on the Visthar campus. We then traveled by plane to Delhi on the 5th for one final week together. In Delhi we visited the Taj Mahal as well as historic locations such as Gandhi’s home, his cremation site and the home of Indira Gandhi.

On the 8th we flew to Varanasi to visit the important centers of Hinduism and Buddhism. This was our final opportunity to meet with resource persons and also to observe the sites held so sacred by these two faiths.

On the 12th we had our final evaluation and the participants began returning to their home countries.

Throughout the fifteen-week process, Mercy Kappen, David Selvaraj and Max Ediger accompanied the participants as mentors, resource persons and friends, meeting with them both formally and informally, showing them the life of Bangalore and being available for any needs that might arise. Many other members of the Visthar staff provided invaluable assistance and friendship as well. Visthar truly became a home and a family for all. Without the committed participation of the staff, including, cooks, cleaners, drivers and support personnel, the School of Peace could not have been completed. The School of Peace owes them a great deal of thanks.

4. School of Peace Program Contents

a. Opening Ceremony

The opening ceremony for the School of Peace, organized by the Visthar staff, was simple yet beautifully moving. Utilizing local resources and integrating Indian traditional methods of welcoming guests, Visthar staff greeted the School of Peace participants at the entrance to the *Aalla*, or conference hall, with its thatched roof and open sides. Guests from various organizations in Bangalore, along with the 35 students of the Bandhavi School for the daughters of temple prostitutes, filled the Aalla and joined in music and dance to celebrate the occasion. Ms Metha Patkar, a social activist who has led the struggle with the people affected by the controversial Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River for the past 19 years, gave the opening address. She challenged participants to recognize the possibilities for true social change, but to have the persistence necessary to continue with the struggle. Her own testimony was an inspiration to all and was the perfect way to begin the School of Peace.

A further challenge was given to participants by the SOP coordinator through a quote by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. made on April 4, 1967.

Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter – but beautiful – struggle for a new world. This is the calling and our brothers and sisters wait eagerly for our response. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard? Will our message be that the forces of global power militate against their arrival as full human beings and we send our deepest regrets? Or, will there be another message of longing, of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their causes, whatever the cost? The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise we must choose in this crucial moment of human history.

b. Modules

b.1 Orientation and Acclimation

The first week focused on helping participants learn to know each other and become familiar with the School of Peace program. Each morning, at 7am participants met in the Aalla to learn yoga as a way to center the self, to relax and to increase concentration. The yoga classes, which lasted for one hour each morning of the first week, were taught by Dr. Subramaniam.

In the mornings, with the help of Visthar staff, a variety of activities were organized which helped participants introduce themselves, provide information on their background and relax among people of different faiths, languages, cultures and nationalities. Mercy Kappan facilitated several sessions on gender sensitivity which encouraged participants to recognize the difference between sexuality and gender and to feel more comfortable talking about these issues which, in many cultures, is not easily done.

Mr. Vijay Padaki spent three days leading the group through a variety of group dynamic activities, studying our value systems and our interpersonal

relationships. All of these activities provided a good foundation for the intense discussions and field trips that were to follow.

b.2 Module 1 – Poverties

***Aim:** Critique the dominant/standardized economic notions of poverty and offer alternate perspectives resulting from an understanding of human needs.*

Subjects included:

- a) Human Needs and Causes of Poverties
- b) Poverties and Globalization
- c) What is Violence in the Context of Poverties?
- d) Development, Violence and Disintegration of Life
- e) Development and Role of the State and Civil Society Organizations in Relation to Poverties
- f) People's Responses to Poverties
- g) Religious Perspectives and Responses to Poverties

*Mercy Kappan led a workshop on identifying poverties as not simply economic in nature (lack of money) but rather an issue of human needs. Human beings need love, acceptance, dignity, physical well-being etc. We need to identify all of these needs when we look at the issue of poverty and find ways to respond to them.

*Gangamma discussed herbal medicine as a way of helping protect the earth and develop a more healthy life. She showed various herbal plants and how to use them for making herbal medicines. The participants experienced the process of making several kinds of herbal treatments and also planted an herbal garden on the Visthar campus.

*Ms Mansur Hasnath, a long time Muslim activist in the slum communities of Bangalore, shared with the group about what Islam has to say concerning poverties. She urged participants to be willing to challenge their religious institutions if those institutions do not side with the poor and oppressed.

*Dr. K. Vijaykumar provided a very detailed description of the teachings of Hinduism, especially how the caste system evolved thousands of years ago and how that caste system continues to create severe oppression and discrimination within the society.

*David Selvaraj shared a perspective on poverties from the Christian experience, suggesting that too often the church turns its back on the poor and oppressed. He urged participants to recognize that religion is made up of cult (practices), creed (sacred texts) and culture (how people live out their faith). We need to look at these three areas when we try to understand our own faith and how it responds to poverties.

*Chan Beng Seng spent several days with SOP discussing globalization and the World Trade Organization. This helped participants understand more deeply how the WTO creates and maintains poverties in the world today.

*Ranjit de Silva from Sri Lanka discussed the importance of protecting the environment through proper maintenance of our soil and water. The earth can provide us with all the food we need if we use it properly, ending our reliance on chemicals and instead making use of the methods of fertilization and insect control which exist within nature. As a practical activity, he helped the participants build three compost baskets on the campus which are an excellent way to help villagers with limited land area grow more vegetables without the use of chemicals.

b.3 Module 2 – Pluralities – Religion, Faith and the Sense of the Sacred

Aim: Enabling participants to recognize and understand differences; moving from tolerance, to respect, to engagement.

Subjects included:

- a) Identity and the Politics of Identity
- b) National Identity and Global Citizenship
- c) Constructions of the Sacred, Religious and Secular
- d) Communalism, Fascism and Religious Fundamentalism: Their Development and Growth
- e) Fragmentation and Loss of Community
- f) Responses to Stereotyping and Profiling
- g) Affirmation of Plurality and Connectedness of Life: Examination of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

*Mr. Manohar is director of the Sangama group which works with sexual minorities. A small group from his organization representing different sexual minority and exploited groups spent the morning with us, sharing their stories and what it is like to be different and unaccepted by society. This was a difficult session for many in the group as it was the first time for them to be confronted with this issue, but by the time the morning was finished friendships had been formed. Perhaps all of us are now more sensitive about how we relate to those we consider “different.”

*Maqbool Siraj is a Muslim journalist who spoke about the history of Muslims in India. From being in the ruling position, Muslims have become a minority that often faces severe repression from the fundamentalist Hindu groups. Again we were helped to see how people’s response to differences, in this case religious differences, can bring about serious suffering and alienation.

*Ranjith Sathyaraj is an activist who also practices the healing art of reiki. He shared his spiritual wisdom with participants, helping them to open their eyes and sense the feelings and presence of the “other”.

*Rev. Manohar Chandra Prasad is a Christian teacher and writer who encourages the development of a Dalit theology. His book, *Dalit Christian Consciousness* is a strong critique of a church theology which continues to be based on high caste Hinduism. He

brought a group of students with him who provided Christian music which has emerged from the Dalit culture and experience. Through this experience we saw that difference is not a bad thing to be avoided. Sometimes our difference is a strength that can bring a strong and moving liberation message to others who are different and oppressed.

*Salbiah Ahmad, from Malaysia and an ICF working committee member, challenged all of us to look more critically at our faith and its teachings. The “cult” aspect of our religion is often something we put too much emphasis on and it is often the cult practices that create conflicts between faiths. If we can go beyond the cult and look more seriously at how we will live out the messages in our sacred texts we will find that, despite being of different faiths, we have much in common that can help us work cooperatively for communities of just peace.

*Trisno Subiakto Sutanto from Indonesia and also a member of ICF’s working committee challenged participants, through a group activity, to find the courage inside themselves to share their life’s struggle more personally with people they do not know well. This “opening up” allows us to also become more sensitive to others who are different from us. He also held a brief workshop on dealing with conflict in which he helped participants see the benefit of working for small agreements rather than only focusing on finding the big solutions to problems. Through small agreements the way toward bigger agreements can be established.

b.4 Module 3 - Toward Transformation

Aim: Enabling participants to envision cultures and communities of justpeace and initiate strategies for transformation of self and society.

Subjects included:

- a) Understanding of Power
- b) Myths of Peace
- c) The Logic of Deterrence
- d) Review of Modules 1 and 2
- e) Understanding and Theories of Nonviolence
- f) Responses to Present Realities by Civil Society
- g) Grassroots Initiatives and Wisdom for Justpeace

*Phra Paisal, a Buddhist monk from Thailand, shared stories of people finding the strength to forgive despite terrible fear and hurt. His message was that if we give compassion back when we are threatened or harmed, we are using a power which is much greater than we realize and can bring about transformation in others as well as in the society. In the evenings he with informally with the group to discuss Buddhism, meditation and other related issues.

*Hartman D’Souza is a very innovative dramatist. Through drama he believes people not only become transformed, but also can transform others. For three days he helped the participants discover the actor within themselves. Slowly setting their shyness aside, they

created a short drama about conflicts that can so easily arise out of miscommunications. The drama was done in each person's own language, emphasizing our differences but also our commonalities. The drama was preformed at the closing ceremony of the SOP.

b.5 Final Visit to Delhi and Varanasi

Our purpose in visiting Varanasi was to visit the sites which are so sacred to Hinduism and Buddhism. Here the Ganges River forms an arc making it possible for people to stand on its bank facing east to offer their prayers as the sun rises. Varanasi is probably one of the most ancient living cities in India. From time immemorial it has been a great religious center for Hindus and one of their most sacred places of pilgrimage, being visited by millions of people every year.

At a distance of 12 km from Varanasi lies Sarnath where Lord Buddha preached his first sermon. Here he revealed the eight fold path that leads to the attainment of inner peace, Enlightenment and Ultimate Nirvana.

*Father Emanuel, a catholic priest doing his PhD on Hinduism provided the SOP with a tremendous amount of information concerning the history of Hinduism and its practice today. He was our guide as we floated down the Ganges and visited other sites in Varanasi. His knowledge of Hinduism was very important in helping us begin to understand this very ancient religion.

*Venerable Dr. Gesha Dambul, a Tibetan Buddhist monk, explained about Buddhist and its practices.

*Fr. Paul D'Souza works in an interfaith dialogue center in Varanasi. He shared about his experience working at interfaith dialogue and encouraged participants to believe that it is possible for people of different faiths to work together effective for transformation.

The closing ceremony was held on the Visthar campus. Guests from organizations in Bangalore joined the participants for this special time. The closing challenge was given by Mr. Mansur, a long-time activist in India. He urged participants to have faith that their actions would bear fruit. Following the ceremony, participants received a certificate of participation.

c. Field Trips

Field visits were designed to give participants a rigorous and personal very experience with the theme of the module to help them move from an intellectual understanding of the issues of the module, to an emotional experience that can lead to creative and courageous actions for justice. Field visits were some distance from the Visthar campus and involved transportation by train, bus, car, motorbike and occasionally plane. The SOP coordinator and members of the Visthar community accompanied the participants on most of the field visits to provide any assistance in the process. At each field visit location, local people served as guides and resource persons. The field visits consisted of

encounters with marginalized communities to hear their stories and experience their suffering and their courageous struggles for liberation. Discussions with local resource persons helped clarify the issues and answer questions. These visits were physically and emotionally intense and provided participants with many opportunities to discover the roots of injustice in society and their own participation, knowingly or unknowingly, in this injustice.

c.1 Field visit on Poverities

One group of six visited Nellore and Chittoor Districts of Andrapradesh. A second group of five visited Cuddalore and Nagapatenam Districts of Tamil Nadu. The third group visit Mariamangalam, Thomayarpanya and Puspapura villages of Mysore. In these visits they learned about the poverty created by forced migration and discrimination based on caste, class and gender.

Participants clearly identified the root causes of these poverities as being systemic rather than caused by laziness, inability to budget, etc. Villagers work hard, long hours, but are unable to break out of their poverty because others control the markets and the land. The poverty of identity is also a serious issue as many people are considered as “untouchable” or even “unseeable” simply because of the caste they are born into. Poverities is not simply about economics, but also about the need for a dignified and secure life for oneself and one’s family.

Unfortunately, these poverities are often supported by our religious institutions, and we need to be willing to look critically at these institutions and speak prophetically to them for the sake of the victims of these poverities.

Participants were challenged to return to their own homes and communities to seek out the “untouchable” people there and work with them for true justice.

c.2 Field Visit on Identity (Dealing with Differences)

One group visited tribal communities in Mananthavady District of Kerala. A second group visited Dalit communities in Raichur while the third group visited a community of Muslim women in Pudukkotai District of Tamilnadu.

Participants discovered that Dalit and tribal cultures, which are very ancient and complex, are put down by upper caste people as being useless and uncivilized. This affects the feeling of positive identity and leads to either depression and passivism or frustration and anger. Both Dalit and tribal communities are working hard to rediscover their own unique identity and to articulate it in confident and courageous ways.

It was further discovered that women are too often discriminated against simply because of their gender. Religious institutions often contribute to this discrimination and when women try to express their own abilities and demand

equality, they can face serious obstacles and threats. It takes much courage and persistence to stand up against this form of discrimination.

c.3 Field Visit on Transformation

For this field visit, all participants flew to Gujarat where they were divided into three groups for three different exposure areas.

One group visited Anand where communal violence erupted in 1992 with many Muslim villagers being killed and driven from their homes. This genocide campaign was instigated by Hindu fundamentalists who desire India to be a Hindu State.

A second group visited Rajpipla where many multinational corporations are raping the natural resources, forcing people from their homes and destroying the environment. It is also the site of the Narmada Dam where a struggle continues to prevent the enlargement of the dam which would flood out many more local villages.

The third group visited Baroda which also suffered much from communal riots.

During this exposure visit, participants discovered that the violence against Muslims was not done directly by the Hindu fundamentalists. Instead the fundamentalists hired poverty stricken Dalit and tribal people to carry out the violence. Thus they used poverty as a tool to bring about the bloody carnage which left many Muslims, tribals and Dalits dead and wounded while the fundamentalists looked on safely. Participants learned that it is extremely important to identify the roots of violence and conflict so as not to be manipulated by others.

The groups were also able to visit organizations that are working hard to rebuild the broken communities and bring about justice. These organizations are made up of both Muslims and Hindus. While the suffering and terror of the riots can never be forgotten, there are Muslims who are seeking ways to forgive those who carried out the violence. This is the sign of hope that transformation is possible.

c.4 Final Field Visit to Varanasi

The final field visit was done as one group to Delhi and Varanasi. In Varanasi the participants met with two resource persons who explained more details about Hinduism and Buddhism. They also were able to visit a Catholic organization that works at interfaith dialogue.

5. Evaluations and Recommendations of Participants

Significant learnings of participants include:

- I now understand that other faiths are also good and we can share with them. These differences are beautiful.
- It is extremely important that we seek out the root causes of conflicts and violence. Otherwise we can not work for transformation. The sessions on structural analysis were extremely helpful in doing this.
- All religions point in the same direction so we can and need to work together for a justpeace community.
- I will go back to my home community and work harder to share with and understand those of other religions.
- SOP was an opportunity for me to look critically at my own religion. I see now how our religions can create conflict rather than peace.
- Sharing our faith with others is about living and sharing together in community rather than just talking.
- I love my religion more now but I have also learned how to approach those of other religions with more understanding and the right attitude.
- Learning about structural analysis was very important for me.
- The study of pluralities was the most important module for me as it helped me learn about other religions.
- I am clearer now what I must do in my community to work for justpeace. I am ready to go back and start work for interfaith justpeace.
- I learned that education is never neutral and I also learned about the culture of oppression and how to identify it.
- This course was very difficult. I did not like it when the coordinator criticized Christianity at the beginning, but I was finally able to step out of my box. I have learned to criticize my religion and I have gotten the power to break some barriers. I now can also see my own poverties. When I came I was in a very narrow box, but now I have changed.
- This has been shock therapy for me. This shock has made me think and see beyond my comfort zone. I have changed. India has helped me see the poor and marginalized in my own country. Most important for me was seeing our relation with the environment.
- God now speaks to me through others despite, or maybe because of, our differences. I have a new understanding of what it means to be a Christian.

-