

## School of Peace 2008

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On February 4, seventeen young people from seven countries in Asia gathered on the Visthar campus in Bangalore India to participate in the third School of Peace (SOP) organized by the Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF). The ICF is a regional interfaith program sponsored by the Christian Conference of Asia, the Asia Pacific Alliance of YMCAs and the EED of Germany.

The goal of SOP is to bring together young people between the ages of 20 and 30 for a three and a half month living/learning experience. The young people come from different religious traditions and many of them live in areas of conflict. Through this experience these young people will be challenged to identify their prejudices and misconceptions of others, begin to understand the roots of conflict, violence and war, and seek positive and nonviolent alternatives for transformation.

The living situation is intense. People from different religious faiths, cultures, languages and traditions stay together in small dorm rooms where they must relate with each other constantly. In the classroom they are encouraged to ask each other questions, to talk about their own faith and the questions and doubts they have. Above all, they are encouraged to listen to the “other” and to reflect deeply on what they are hearing.

Conflicts do arise as they would in any arduous community situation. But rarely are those conflicts of a religious nature. More often they develop because of personality differences or cultural differences. A woman from Hong Kong jokingly pushes a young man from Thailand with her foot and he reacts angrily. In Thailand the foot is never used for anything except walking, and to touch someone with ones foot is an insult. Someone talks too much or laughs too loudly, irritating those from countries where it is proper to speak softly and as little as necessary. These little conflicts can easily become significant dividers in the community if not taken seriously, but they also provide a great learning opportunity as participants begin to see that diversity is a gift and through these differences we begin to appreciate a bigger world and become more sensitive to those who think, act and believe differently than we do. This is one of the first steps in recognizing that the way we do things or the way we believe might not be perfect and we can learn from others, not only to be more open to differences, but to also evaluate our own lives and reflect on our own faith in order to strengthen and deepen it.

Many of the participants come from areas of conflict. One young Muslim man from Southern Thailand arrived only a few days after his close friend was stabbed five times by a Buddhist gang. His friend survived, but it was a reminder to us that every day Muslims in the southernmost provinces of Thailand are killed, wounded or placed in prison without trial.

Participants from Nepal shared about the long war that has ripped their country apart. Several of them work with women who have lost their families in the war, been raped or whose homes were burned. They reflect on the trauma these women and the small children must live with every day and mourn the fact that not enough is being done to help them find healing.

Friends from Burma discussed how the 50-year civil war in their country has left millions internally displaced with little or no aid from the international community. They talk, not only of the terrible suffering of the people, but also of their determination to stay with the people in the conflict zones and offer help even though the international community fears to support them.

Two young women from Indonesia and Hong Kong describe the pain of rape and their struggle to find comfort and understanding even when the church rejected them. This sharing was a shock to participants because it made everyone realize that violence against women doesn't just happen to someone way off there, but it happens to our friends – to the person sitting right next to us. We can no longer ignore this issue.

The School of Peace is an attempt to deal with these realities head on. We cannot simply look at violence from an academic perspective which promotes different models as magic solutions. We must look at it from the human and spiritual perspective, empathizing with the pain and anger felt by the victims. We cannot discuss easy answers nor deny the presence of hatred and the desire for vengeance. These are real emotions for those who are battered about at the hands of the powerful. A friend from Nepal, after sharing some of her bitter experiences during the war, said, "I know we need to forgive, but I can't forgive. How can I forgive what they (the military) have done to us?"

These are hard questions and we need to avoid the easy answers by having the courage to look for positive alternative responses. Hatred and vengeance seem to come naturally to the human community/individual who has experienced violence, but it takes great courage and wisdom to step back and recognize that hatred and vengeance only increase the suffering and thus new creative and daring alternatives must be attempted. No one in the School of Peace can offer the best alternative so no course is given with such easy answers or models. Instead, participants are encouraged to go back to their own religious faith, their history, their culture and their traditions to seek the foundations of justice and peace that exist there. We must find our alternative responses within our own experiences and especially within our spiritual faith. If our religion cannot lead us to a positive, loving and compassionate response to violence done against us, then it loses its value and appeal to the world.

For encouragement, the participants look at the examples of people like Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Gandhi, the Dalit leader Ambedkar, and others. We can learn from their experiences, but more importantly they offer us courage and hope that violence can be overcome through nonviolence and compassion.

So, we explore the teachings of our religions which can lead us toward peace with justice. For Christians, the Sermon on the Mount is one of the greatest challenges Jesus gave us, and if we have the courage and faith to follow it, we can neutralize any hatred against us. For Muslims there is the concept of Jihad, a word which has been misinterpreted, misused and abused by Muslim and Christian alike. The word Jihad simply means struggle and Muslims are challenged to take on the Greater Jihad and the Lesser Jihad. The Greater Jihad is the most difficult and is the struggle within our own selves against greed, hatred, arrogance, exclusiveness etc. The Lesser Jihad is the struggle to right wrongs in the society around us. Buddhism, Hinduism and

Indigenous Spirituality also have much to teach about building communities of justpeace. We need to be open to learn from them, but more importantly we need the courage to act.

The three and a half month program of the SOP is designed to help participants (and facilitators) move from tolerance of the “other” to acceptance and then on to engagement. Many of us grow up tolerating those who are different from us in culture, dress, language, faith or lifestyle. Like a toothache, our tolerance helps us maintain civility until it gets to painful to bear. Then we react strongly, often in negative ways. We need to move from only tolerating the “other” to accepting them. This requires that we truly believe that God created a world of diversity and that there is much beauty in diversity. Accepting the “other” does not always mean that we agree with them, but rather that we acknowledge the value of difference.

Moving to engagement is perhaps the most difficult step we need to take. It happens only when we begin to recognize that the “other” also has experienced some “truth” and that by listening and reflecting on what they have to say we can gain a deeper understanding of “truth”. To engage the “other” should not be a threatening experience for us if we are well-grounded in our own faith and spirituality. By engaging with those of other religious traditions, we can gain a deeper respect and understanding of our own faith. Engagement recognizes that God is at work everywhere in the world if we but open our eyes, ears and hearts to experience it.

In this process of engaging the “other” many questions come up within the group. Who killed Jesus? Christians say they are a monotheistic religion, but yet they believe in the trinity, so doesn't that mean you have three Gods? Why do Muslims pray five times a day? Doesn't it get tiresome? Why do Muslim women wear a covering all the time? Do Buddhists believe in God? Is Buddha their God? Why does Hinduism promote the caste system? This is an evil system so is Hinduism supporting this kind of evil? Do Indigenous people believe a rock or a tree is God?

To deal with these questions, we must move from discussion to dialogue. In discussion we throw ideas back and forth with the intention of convincing others that our position is the correct one. (The word discussion comes from the Greek work “Discus” which is the heavy circular weight thrown around in sports events.) During a dialogue, we focus more on listening and reflecting on what we have heard. This allows for a flow of ideas back and forth much like the wafting of gentle breezes into a room through open windows. Once our minds and hearts are open to hear, we can begin dialogue with the “other”. As the spirit of God gently flows among us, we begin to see deeper truths about God and God's intentions for the world.

Participants are encourage to sit with someone of another religion and initiate dialogue. During the dialogue they focus on two things. First, what new information have I learned about the other persons faith and spirituality which is important? Secondly, how has their sharing helped me understand my own faith and spirituality more deeply? This is a practice that also can help us deal with differences and conflicts at the individual as well as the societal level.

One Christian participant confided one day that when he arrived in SOP he literally hated Muslims. He admitted that he had never met one, but he still hated them because of what he heard on the news or saw on television. His roommate was Muslim and for more than a month they had tried to engage each other in dialogue. “Now,” he said, “I have begun to see God much

more clearly. I have learned much about God from my Muslim brother and am more aware of my commitment to my Christian faith.”

Because so many of the participants come from areas of conflict, the issue of justice is raised often. Unfortunately, the English word for justice has now too often come to refer to laws, punishment, courts, police and prisons. We talk about the “Halls of Justice” when referring to courts, and the “Justice of the Peace” when referring to judge. When exploring the meaning of justice in our different religions, we find something very different. In Christianity, the word justice in the Bible is usually used to mean “righteousness.” In this sense, justice is not about laws and punishment, but rather about “right living.” Again, the Sermon on the Mount expresses most clearly the Biblical concept of justice.

In Buddhism, all people are urged to seek justice through the eight-fold path which includes striving to have the right vision, right determination, right speech, right work, right effort, right memory, right devotion and right livelihood.

For Indigenous people, justice is about living in harmony with people and with the environment. They believe that if you treat others with justice, justice will be returned to you. If you take something from nature (food, trees for building, etc), take only what you need, take it with respect and offer something back in payment.

By looking at this perspective of justice we begin to see that, even though forgiving those who have brought violence against us seems impossible, we need to have the courage to offer forgiveness and respond to the “enemy” with righteousness. Only this way can we be consistent with our faith and our God.

SOP 2008 concluded, as did SOP 2007, with the Festival of Justpeace. The purpose of this festival is to bring together marginalized communities, and those working with marginalized communities, to celebrate the hope we all have that “another world is possible.” That new world is a world of interfaith justpeace in which we can live together peacefully with each other and with our environment. The day-long festival celebrates this hope through food, music, dance, art, handicrafts, organic produce, film, laughter and fun. Our mass media always highlights the violence in our societies and this seems to strengthen those who want to promote violence. We feel it is necessary to celebrate the positive and thus to strengthen the people and the movements who do sincerely believe that a world of justpeace is possible.

This year it is estimated that at least 1,600 people attended the festival. SOP participants contributed to many aspects of the celebration, but most notably they contributed to the food. They spent the full day preparing and sharing foods from Nepal, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, Burma and Hong Kong. This lent an international atmosphere to the festival and proved to be very popular.

After three and a half months in SOP, participants do not leave feeling like they have all the answers and that the road ahead will be easy or even successful. They leave with lots of questions that will require much exploring to find answers to. But most of them also leave with a feeling that there is hope even though the task ahead seems nearly impossible. They have

found new energy, and a deeper conviction that, together, we can build a world of justpeace, the world Jesus referred to as the Community of God.

Finally, it is important to understand something about SOP from the perspective of the participants. Each month they were asked to write a reflective essay about what they were learning, how they were changing and whether they could see the future with more hope. Writing such an essay in one's own language is difficult, but to do so in another language might seem out of the question. They worked long hard hours trying to articulate their thoughts and feelings in English. Below are little sections of some of their essays. Only minimal editing has been done so that you can see their reflections through their own words.

Hong Kong, Christian

As Max said that the more we know, our responsibility is also more. So, I understand this is a preparation course rather than learning course. We spend three months here to prepare well for action and transformation. In my dairy, I wrote to Hong Kong friends, said, "Excuse me! I am not in holiday; I stay in front of many challenges which challenge my comfort zone, religious faith, bravery, my values, my capacity etc. I have to take response because I know more inhuman and inequality things that I cannot keep SILENT. Do you willing to walk together? I want anyone to share the burden."

Nepal, Hindu

About the sharing faith, when a friend shared about his Islam faith my thinking has changed because I used to think that Muslim are too cruel, they are bad, I did not like their religion. I used to scare to listening anything about Muslim. But after his sharing my view directly change, I learn that don't judge looking outside, try to see the root and cause and I also know that all religion are not bad, bad is our thinking and our view. So, to see the good we have to change our point of view. And I also learn that if we want to know the reality or to know someone clearly we have to engage them and put our feeling on their feeling (walk a mile in their shoes) and we try to seek understanding.

Nepal, Hindu

At first, I thought that it is difficult to create justpeace. But now, I have new ideas and hope that we can create justpeace because we have been making a strong network with people of different religious faiths and regions, all of them are looking for justpeace . Our positive thinking and spiritual insights can play the crucial role for transformation and create a new society with peace, justice and justpeace. We have to love each other; love has a power that provides us a strong energy for fighting to every challenge. I hope, if we believe in our ideology, we can create a beautiful society, country and world with peace, justice and justpeace.

Laos, Buddhist

Since I have joined the school of peace I feel like I am a student again to continue to study new lessons to improve my skills which we have never had in Laos. The first module some of the lessons are new for me so I have to try to understand more about the concept of the lessons, after leaning, I am changing some ideas what I have kept for all my life. I understand deeper what should I do for myself and the communities & people

who I am working. I am more confident to have different kinds of friends who are from different countries, different religions, different identities but we are unique, we have many different things but we can stay together without any wall between us, I have known that each country has different situations, everywhere needs to try to change to the better way. We should not stop dreaming, one day the dream will come true and we have to have hope in life. If not we are wasting our lifetime with nothing. Time is like the river that never returns.

#### Shan State Burma, Buddhist

During the second module even though time is short yet it is meaningful for me that I know conflict can be solved by traditional ways. This helps me transform my idea. When going back to my country I will try to collect my cultural values like folk tales, poems, songs and legends that can help resolve conflicts. I come to know now that these are valuable things for me.

#### Nepal, Hindu

When I was a child, I observed so many caste and class discriminations within my society. I have believed in this caste system because our society treated me according to religious modified principles and education systems. But now I feel guilty. Why did I believe these things? Why I follow this without any argument? Now, I have got a clear vision towards caste system and class system by school of peace, so I am very proud of SOP. I want to contribute something for my society. I want to change my working style then how can I share about the structural hindrances of capitalism economic system? How can I diminish caste and class based violence? How can I use my knowledge for creating good community? These are the challenges for me.

#### Nepal, Indigenous

For developing the situation of poor and backward people, we have to choose leaders from grassroots level. Because the grassroots level know the need of people. From here (SOP) I learn many useful things to bring transformation in my community. I don't know how much I can give to my community but I will try my best. If I bring a little bit transformation in my community and country, it is very big for me.

#### Karenni State Burma, Christian

As a Catholic believer, I come to realize that prayer like meditation and yoga is means for community's awareness and imaginative reinterpretation of religion tradition. I remember that in Buddhist tradition trees are ordained in order to protect them from being cut and to raise awareness to the people who destroy forests. For me this is a very good way how to use religious traditions of prayer life which can have transformation of the mind of people. As a personal transformation yet it rarely happens overnight. It involves training, testing and time. I realize that there are no shortcuts to transformation. In regard with Gandhi's prayer perspective of transformation, my head is overruled with many questions. Do I really want to change or am I content to remain as I am? What price am I willing to pay to be transformed? These questions are big challenges for me.

Thailand, Muslim

In the past I saw many problems and learned of many negative things. I thought these things should change, but I did nothing! Always I did nothing!

The transformation is not necessary to start with a big number of people. But we can just start with a small number of people as SOP. The important thing is our blue print. Do we have a blue print? If not think about that and make our social blue print. If yes use transformation method to transform our society.

Just start thinking. If you already start, keep thinking and continue to action something.

Maybe it means I have done something, but now I know that I will not do nothing any more.