

INTERFAITH COMMUNICATION IN FIJI

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Communication, talking and listening to another, if it is to achieve real depth, necessitates both openness and respect, the approaching of another with sensitivity. It is this spirit that underlies dialogue especially when it relates to people of other races and religious traditions. Because of the cosmopolitan nature of Fiji, such communication or dialogue has an important role to play, and while some successes in this area have been achieved, there is still a need for further education.

Fiji is both a multi-cultural and a multi-religious nation, lying at the crossroads of the Pacific. It comprises 333 islands. The population is made up of Fijians, Indians who are descendants of indentured labourers brought to Fiji in the late 1880s to work in the sugar plantations, and people from most of the Pacific countries around us. Some of the latter group, especially many of the Solomonese and niVanatua are descendants of slaves brought to Fiji during the era of "Blackbirding," as the slave trade in the Pacific was known. The multi-cultural background, however, extends much further, with people from Asian countries as well as expatriates from Western countries, especially Australia, New Zealand and the USA making a cosmopolitan mix.

Fiji's population as at 25th August 1996 was 777,655; of these 394,999 or 51% were Fijians, 336,579 or 43.6% were Indians and 41,077 or 5.3% others.¹

Among this multi-cultural population are found most of the major religious traditions. A drive through the capital, Suva, reveals a variety of places of worship: cathedrals, churches and chapels, temples and shrines, mosques. The religious make up of our population in 1996 was:

Christians	57.99%
Hindu	33.69%
Muslim	7.01%
Sikh	0.40%
Other Religions	0.25%
No religion	0.66% ²

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¹Census 1966, Provisional Results, Bureau of Statistics, Suva, 1997.

²1996 Census of Fiji, Bureau of Statistics, Suva 1998.

In such a setting, in depth communication among the various cultural and religious groups is essential for the well being of the country.

The Catholic Church has played an important supportive role in developing communication among our multi-cultural, multi-religious nation and plays one of the leading roles in interreligious dialogue. The official motivation and guidance received from Vatican II, as well as the Church's growing awareness of the role of other religions in the plan of salvation, have helped to develop an awareness of and the need for dialogue among religious organizations. Today, Petero Mataca, our Archbishop, is committed to interreligious dialogue. He was one of the Church leaders who called for combined prayer at the time of the 1987 coup, and has remained a strong supporter of interreligious prayer at national celebrations. He is also, an advocate of interreligious dialogue and was one of the instigators in establishing "Interfaith Search Fiji" along the same lines as the Multi-Cultural Centre in Birmingham, England. More recently he has challenged all Catholics to reach out to those living in their neighbourhoods and villages and to get to know people of other faiths.

Mainly through the work of the Columban Fathers, the Church has also been instrumental in the establishment of "People for Intercultural Awareness" an organization which endeavours, through bringing together people of different races, especially Fijians and Indians, to achieve understanding and harmony among our races. Through workshops and seminars, participants are enabled to share and dialogue about their prejudices and the problems within the Fijian situation, and are helped to better appreciate one another's cultures.

To help develop greater understanding of our Indian culture among the Fijian clergy, the Archbishop has made it compulsory for Fijian seminarians to experience a time of cross cultural adaptation, living with Hindu families in rural areas, sharing with them and becoming part of the family.

The Catholic Church has participated in collective efforts to extend dialogue through its membership in the "Fiji Council of Churches" and "Interfaith Search Fiji." The former concentrates on dialogue and witness among Christians Churches, especially those who are members of the Fiji Council of Churches Anglican, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Congregational, Salvation Army. Church leaders come together to discuss and share on the wider community and its needs, on the problems facing

them and to plan for combined action. This ecumenical approach extends to participation in Women's and Youth Groups, and to the Research Group which was established to investigate issues of concern to the Churches and the community as a whole. The group reports on its findings, advises on actions, and, where possible, initiates action.

"Interfaith Search Fiji" seeks to build bridges of respect and understanding among the sixteen member groups drawn from Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Bahai traditions. It also seeks to reach out into the wider community through discussion gatherings on a specific topic selected for the year, through interfaith prayer and through press releases and letters both to members of Government and to the media, bringing to their notice interreligious concerns and the need for sensitivity to others.

The Catholic Church also worked with other groups in making submissions to the Constitution Review Commission. It presented its own submission and also participated in the hours of discussion and preparation of the submissions presented by the Fiji Council of Churches Research Group and Interfaith Search Fiji. Through the work of the Commission, Fiji now has a new Constitution, one that clearly states the rights of the individual and introduces a new system of voting, from which we can hope for political stability and ethnic inclusivity. The Churches and Interfaith Search Fiji can be proud of their contributions to this, but because this constitution is still fragile and needs to be nourished, they still have an important role to play as they support and encourage greater understanding and respect for other cultures and religions.

The Church's efforts have extended to some of Fiji's tertiary institutions. The Pacific Regional Catholic Seminary has courses on the World Religions and on Ecumenism, taught by members of the faculty. The students from these classes have been encouraged to participate in Interfaith Search discussion gatherings. The General Secretary of the Fiji Council of Churches and the Coordinator of Interfaith Search have both been invited to speak to one of the classes and to share about their work and objectives.

Corpus Christi Teachers College this year has introduced a course on the world religions present here in Fiji. Interfaith Search Fiji arranged for members of the various groups to address the students and share with them the major beliefs of their religions. The course also involved a visit to

different places of worship, and an assignment required students to meet with a person of another faith and dialogue on their belief in God and their relationship with God. Such communication, on a one to one level, has brought about an awareness of former prejudices and a desire to know members of other religions and races.

The Pacific Theological College, which draws its students from various parts of the Pacific, has also addressed the need for dialogue with other religions. The coordinator of Interfaith Search has been invited to speak to students on dialogue and the work of Interfaith Search Fiji, while just prior to the feasts of Diwali and Prophet Mohammed's Birthday, a Hindu and a Muslim were invited to address staff and students and explain the significance of these feasts.

However, there are still times when dialogue and communicating with those of other religions has not been possible. Although some members of the Methodist Church favour and participate in Interfaith dialogue and prayer, they are restricted to a certain extent, by the decisions of the annual conference of the Methodist Church. Even among members of the mainlines churches supporting such dialogue, there has been opposition and a criticism of pastors and those who do participate in dialogue and prayer. The fundamentalist groups do not accept the principles of dialogue, and see contact with peoples of other religions only as an opportunity for converting them to Christianity. Such is not the aim of dialogue. Despite the work to educate and sensitise the public, there are still people in Fiji who think of Hindus as pagans and idol-worshippers, and who are not prepared to see positive values in other faiths, or to respect differences of belief and practice.

Nevertheless, there have been real advances made, and some success achieved through the in depth communication at the different levels of the community. Interreligious prayer is now included in our national celebrations, and through efforts towards public conscientization, various organizations are now beginning meetings and congresses with interreligious prayer.

The media, too, has recognized the importance of this and has approached Interfaith Search Fiji concerning its stance on religious issues.

Yet other examples, this time at the grass roots level, relate to people coming to the Interfaith Search office for help. On two occasions there were

requests for help in resolving difficulties and conflict among the various Christian groups within the village. The principles of dialogue were explained and a plan of action was discussed with the two gentlemen concerned. Later, each returned with stories of at least partial success. In one village, members of the Churches, fundamental and mainline, have been able to sit down together and discuss problems, while their youth have organized a combined Youth Group. The conflict has ceased and there is now a more peaceful atmosphere in the village. The result achieved in the other village was more a dialogue of action. Members of the groups came together to plan and then work on a community project. This too, has helped bring about a sense of unity. Another person came for help in introducing dialogue among the Hindu, Muslim and Christian members of his area. Again, the principles underlying dialogue and prayer together were discussed and have been used to bring greater unity to the rural area.

Within Interfaith Search Fiji itself, there has been a growth in understanding and respect, and an environment has been established in which suspicion and fear have no place. I would like to conclude this article with the words of one of the Interfaith Search members, who was sharing about what she has seen achieved through dialogue and communication in depth when respect and openness are important values.

"When we began, we were like little islands separated from one another, looking across the room at one another with suspicion and fear. Today the islands have come together. We look forward to our meeting and gatherings because there we meet friends."

"Since we have started sharing and praying together, we have come to understand each other's way of praying. Their prayers are different from mine, but they pray as I do, with respect, singing chanting, saying their prayers humbly in the presence of God. Although I do not understand their language, I see the manner in which the prayers are offered. I experience that I am not alone. I am one with the group praying".³

³Conversation with teacher Gendawati Prasad, October, 1987.