

Building Life-affirming Communities

Face to Face with the many poor and the many faiths in Asia



On 25th February, India Peace Centre welcomed the twelve participants of the Face to Face program 2019. Face to Face is a six-week long program, which is meant for theology students of the partner churches of the Council for World Mission (CWM). The program was organized by Council for World Mission and hosted by India Peace Centre. “Focus on being ‘face to face’ with engagement spirituality, economic justice, economics of the poor and ecumenism at the grassroots. You will see this aplenty in India” were the challenging words of Rev. Asir Ebenezer, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in India and the Chairperson of India Peace Centre to the participants of Face to Face India 2019 which kickstarted on 25th February 2019 with an inaugural function at India Peace Centre, Nagpur. Rev. Ebenezer delivered the keynote address on the theme ‘Building life affirming communities: Face to Face with the many poor and the many faiths in Asia’ which was also attended by members of civil society, religious and ideological groups in Nagpur.

Dr. Sudipta Singh, Mission Secretary, Research and Capacity Development at Council for World Mission, who was also present on the occasion, outlined the objectives, process and the methodology of the program stating the importance and implication of such training in the context of the empire. He encouraged the participants to face the realities, as they are, and build their perspectives on justice so that they can be resistant to the empire.

Mr. Kasta Dip, Director of India Peace Centre, who was the dean of the program, welcomed the participants and guests, expressing gratefulness to CWM for the partnership in this program. He also exclaimed that doing justice is the way to peace and everyone seeking peace must find it by defending justice anywhere and everywhere. It is a missional challenge – a call!

The participants came from eight different countries: South Africa, Malawi, Zambia, Indonesia, Samoa, India, South Korea and Germany. They all came to Nagpur to attend a cross cultural learning experience which included understanding of and getting exposed to Indian cultures, as well as different religions present in the country. On the main Topic: “Building Life-Affirming Communities: Face to Face with the many poor and the many faiths in Asia”, they went through workshops and sessions on different topics. During this program, the group also visited New Delhi and Bangalore to attend workshops there and to see different sides of India to understand its diversity.

Therefore, the participants were located in Nagpur for four weeks, in Bangalore for one week and in New Delhi for one week.



During their time in Nagpur, the program covered the topics of Understanding Indian Society, Understanding Caste System, Understanding Poverty, Understanding Hinduism, Understanding Islam, Understanding Buddhism, Religions and Questions of Justice and Peace, Ecological Justice as well as Multiple Religion Belongings. A lot of the sessions were connected to different religions and the program also included visits to different places of worship in Nagpur. Subject experts and scholars came from different parts of India to facilitate sessions and conversations including Dr. Prince Gajendra Babu, an educationist and sociologist from Chennai; Rev. Dr. Vincent Manoharan from the National Council for Dalit Human Rights; Prof. Shrinivas Khandewale, a renowned economist from Nagpur University; Dr. John Menachery, Principal of MSS Social Work College; Prof. Meera Baindur, a Hindu philosopher from Manipal University; Dr. Faizur Rahman, General Secretary of Moderate Islamic Thoughts; Dr. Vikas Jambhulkar from RTM Nagpur University; Rev. Dr. Allan Pallana from United Theological College; Dr. Tejinder Singh Rawal, a renowned environmentalist and chartered accountant; Dr. Yugal Rayalu, a political thinker and Marxist and Mr. Nagamitra Akshobhaya, a Buddhist scholar. In addition, the group was also invited to some homes of the core group members of India Peace Centre who represent different faiths and confessions. By visiting people who belong to different faiths and ideologies, the group was able to experience the different communities in a unique and practical way, rather than just theoretically. As the program came to an end, the participants were asked to present a paper on the topic “Building Life-affirming communities”, using one area they’ve been educated about through Face to Face and connecting it to their own context. It became more visible for everyone how useful the learnings were in every single context.

Face to Face Bangalore

During the six-week long Face to Face program the participants of the program took part in a Bible Study Workshop in Bangalore on the theme “Building Life Affirming Communities”. The workshop was organized by Council for World Mission in partnership with India Peace Centre and the United Theological College. The participants were joined by theological educators and research scholars wherein each participant was given thirty minutes to present his or her bible study they wrote beforehand. The papers mostly dealt with social issues that are currently present in

their own countries and showed possible solutions using the Bible. Therefore, the workshop showed a broad spectrum of different issues that are present in the world today. Rev. Dr. Allan Palanna, Rev. Dr. Dexter Maben, Rev. Dr. Rohan Gideon and Rev. Dr. Pearly Walter facilitated the process of preparation, presentation and discussions. They were able to give the participants advice and helped them to develop their Bible Studies.



Furthermore, during the time in Bangalore, the Face to Face group attended lectures held on the struggles of the LGBTIQ community and gender issues. Afterwards, the participants were given time to explore the city of Bangalore. They visited the famous gardens, local markets and some of the partner organizations of India Peace Centre, including Student Christian Movement of India, Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society and the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College.

Face to Face Delhi

One week of the program was spent in Delhi to get a wider impression of the diversity of India. The group also attended a seminar on 'Building Life Affirming Communities: Faiths and Ideologies in Dialogue'. They had one session on the topic of Understanding Sikhism. It included the perspectives of the Dalits, Christians, Muslims, Adivasi and Hindus. It concluded Magsaysay award recipient Wilson Bezwada, a renowned Dalit activist based in New Delhi; Adv. Irfan Engineer, Director of Centre for the Study of Society and Secularism, Mumbai; Rev. Monodeep Daniel, Dean of St. Stephen College and a priest from Church of North India; Prof. Indira Mukherjee, a promoter of Dalit and tribal arts and cultures; Ms. Ashmeet Kaur Bilkhu from Apne Aap Women Worldwide and Sheeba Aslam Fehmi, a scholar from Jawaharlal Nehru University.



During the time in Delhi, the group got a more practical impression of some of the religions they were taught about during their time in Nagpur and Bangalore. As a part of the programme, the participants visited Jama Masjid as well as Bangla Sahib Gurudwara and the Lotus Temple, a house of worship for Bahai faith.

To show them the diverse perspectives of India once more, the group attended another workshop in a more rural area in Faridabad outside New Delhi. The workshop mainly dealt with the theme: "Unbound Disciples of Unbound Christ in an Indian Context" and was held at Dharma Jyoti Vidya Peeth, Faridabad.

All in all, Face to Face India, 2019 ended on 5th April, after six weeks of cross-cultural learning with a valedictory function held in the campus of National Council of Churches in India. The participants were able to get an impression of the Indian culture and its diversity, as well as learn about many different faiths and religions. All the work they have done was leading them to the main topic: "Building Life-Affirming communities, Face to Face with the many faiths and the many poor in Asia". Therefore, they are now able to connect their learning to their own contexts and build a Life-Affirming community in their home countries. Dr. Sudipta Singh, delivered the valedictory address and Rev. Asir Ebenezer commissioned the participants to be torchbearers of justice and peace in their struggle against empire.