

(Declaration of the World Conference of the Religions,
October 1 - 6, 1991, Kochi, India.)

" INTERFAITH PILGRIMAGE IN HOPE "

Ten years ago, in this very town of Kochi, 225 members of different faiths from India and abroad assembled for the " World Conference of Religions " in a somewhat apprehensive atmosphere. Mindful of the history of the antagonism between faiths. In this week of October 1 - 6, 1991, over 350 people met in a much more accepting and trusting atmosphere, for in those ten years, much progress has been made in interfaith relationship. The very fact that so many people should come together so willingly at a considerable expenditure of time and effort illustrates the atmosphere of joy and hope.

The deliberations covered topics which vitally determines the future of the world. The participants from over 12 faiths took as their themes :

- a) Inter-religious dialogue - Our common pilgrimage
- b) Religion and the struggle for social justice
- c) Spirituality and environment.

The conference was organised by the World Fellowship of Inter-Religious Council and encouraged by the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, The Vatican, World Council of Churches, World Congress of Faiths, World Conference of Religions for Peace, Temple of Understanding and other organisations.

Among the inspirational passages with which the conference was launched were : " Plurality of Religions demand understanding and respect for the partner, willingness to listen, to absorb, to adopt and to enrich oneself. In the process, one must be prepared to change and so perhaps suffer. The English poet Coleridge was quoted as saying, " He who loves Christianity better than Christ will proceed to love his sect more than Christianity and ultimately love himself more than his sect." Recent formal documents from Pope John Paul II were quoted to show that human fulfilment has a community dimension - love of God and love of neighbour.

As we began our five-day pilgrimage in our quest for human solidarity, we were at once confronted with the fact that inter-religious dialogues cannot be discussed apart from social justice. In looking at the injustices prevailing in the society, especially oppression of women and underprivileged people, we saw that the injustices had the religious undertones. The malpractices of religion by certain sects have also supported social injustices such as apartheid. Further the dowry system was identified as one of the social problems with which religion is not properly coping. Another social problem which is entrenched in the religious context is casteism. Religion has also been misused to manipulate and exploit people. In the face of all these social injustices which are relevant to religion, religious leaders cannot be passive onlookers. It is incumbent on us to become the conscience of the society.

When we approached inter-faith dialogue itself, we came to realise that the lack of dialogues cost lives, absorbs enormous resources, and inflicts most damages on the poor and

marginalised. In order to have effective dialogues, we must go back to the true roots of our own religions. Our study of other religions must then be with an open, appreciating mind. Difference of doctrines is not disastrous; it is an opportunity for healthy dialogue. We must have an inner dialogue of hearts. Only then will the exterior dialogue be fruitful. Religious dialogues require deep concern and sensitivity to our feelings.

Obstacles in dialogues are fear, pride, narrow-mindedness, complacency, intolerance and dogmatism. In true dialogue, we must be willing to be changed. At the same time true dialogue deepens our own faith. Dialogues should be based on truth and peace, but never on compromises. Dialogues give us the ability to cope with problems together that we could not face alone. There can be no genuine world peace without inter-religious dialogues.

On the vital issue of environmental survival, we acknowledged our spiritual responsibility to preserve life on the planet. "Earth is our mother, and we are the children of mother earth" (Atharva Veda). The entire universe is permeated with the divine reality, and all of life is interdependent. "If you pluck a flower, you disturb a star." Responsible spirituality demands reverence and gratitude for nature and a sense of stewardship. It is the duty of the religious people to inspire these feelings and to educate people that we must stop destroying our life support system through our stupidity.

We recognise and appreciate the efforts of the group working on the Asian Earth Charter, and we support their objectives.

RESOLUTION :

Considering all the above, this conference resolves that

1. Individually and collectively, we will do our best to promote inter-faith dialogues.
2. We will endeavour to educate children in schools and colleges about the importance and the process of dialogues between religions.
3. We will endeavour to bring about social justice through better understanding and practice of the true teachings of all religions.
4. We resolve to educate people to reduce wants, cut out wastes, and where possible to recycle and reuse materials.
5. We resolve to observe June 6th as Holy Earth Day.
6. Every participant will plant and care for a sapling this year.
7. Each one of us will take effective steps to keep our neighbourhood clean.
8. We will support those who are defending the rights of tribal people against those who are making dams that will submerge vast areas of forest and farmland.