

How do Interfaith activities contribute to peace building?

Kia ora tatou and thank you for this opportunity to speak, much appreciation to the Minister Ashraf Choudhary for sponsoring this conference here at parliament and many thanks to the organizing committee for doing such a great job on this conference.

My name is Jimi Wallace of Soka Gakkai International of New Zealand and I'm talking from the Buddhist perspective. As we've already heard there are a large number of diverse Buddhist schools. The SGI adheres to Nichiren Buddhism.

I'd like to start with a quote from Josei Toda, the 2nd president of Soka Gakkai. Probably very few of you have heard of him so a quick intro: Toda was imprisoned during World War II for his beliefs and support for peace. While wartime prison in Japan permanently broke his health, at the same time he had a profound spiritual awakening. Prior to the war the Soka Gakkai had consisted of 3,000 educators, after the war it had been crushed by the government and completely disappeared. Prior to his death in 1958 Toda had rebuilt the organization to an amazing one million households. He used to say "If you gathered the likes of Shakyamuni Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, and Confucius in the same room they would get on like a house on fire. The problem is that the disciples can't follow their founders' teachings."

Others have touched on the question of why is it, despite the good intention of religion, that religions are used to promote conflict. In the context of New Zealand, however, I think the issue is more one of a need for education at the grassroots level in our respective faith communities about the fact that other faiths are OK.

Point seven of the SGI Charter says:

SGI shall, based on the Buddhist spirit of tolerance, respect other religions, engage in dialogue and work together with them toward the resolution of fundamental issues concerning humanity.

Daisaku Ikeda, who succeeded Toda as the third president of Soka Gakkai, and who is the current president of SGI, has embarked on a global dialogue campaign over the last three decades. His partners in dialogue are varied, leaders of nations, politicians, educators, scholars, scientists, economists, peace activists, journalists, writers, poets, artists, entertainers and astronauts. He says, "The courage to meet and talk with people is absolutely crucial. Choosing dialogue is itself the triumph of peace and of humanity." Many of these dialogues have been published (names some of you may have heard are). David Krieger, Linus Pauling, Johan Galtung, Majid Tehranian, Mikhail Gorbachev and many more.

In the mid 70's Ikeda was severely criticized by the media and others in Japan for going to Russia, "For what reason is a Buddhist leader going to a communist country?" His response was "Because there are human beings there".

In 1996 Ikeda established the Toda Institute for Global Peace and Policy Research and appointed Majid Tehranian as its founding director. Tehranian is a graduate of Dartmouth and Harvard and a professor of international communications at the University of Hawaii. This appointment was unprecedented since Majid is not a member of the SGI, in fact he is not even a Buddhist, but is a Sufi Muslim from Iran.

Dr Tehranian has adopted as the motto for his projects "Dialogue of civilizations for world citizenship".

The dialogue conducted between Mr. Ikeda and Dr. Tehranian was ground breaking, and was published by the British Academic Press under the title "A Buddhist – Islamic Dialogue".

In his Preface to that dialogue, Daisaku Ikeda writes

Differences of race, nationality, or culture do not of themselves create division or confrontation. It is people's hearts and minds that supply the energy that tears people apart....

(Martin Buber) says that real religious dialogue depends on having open minds and hearts. You must know – really see – the other party and make the effort to appeal to him. It is an encounter between conviction and conviction and honest exchange between character and character. If these conditions are met, then a true community will emerge. It is the spirit of such "open dialogue", I believe, that our present world is waiting for....

If one drop of the water of dialogue is allowed to fall on the waste land of intolerance, where attitudes of hatred and exclusionism have so long prevailed; there will be a possibility for trust and friendship to spring up. This, I believe, is the most trustworthy and lasting road to that goal. Therefore, I encourage the flow of dialogue not only on the political plane but also on the border level of the populace as a whole.

So, in answer to the question - Interfaith activities can contribute to peace building through promoting "open dialogue". Through open dialogue we can arrive at the human being and understanding. In the process we may also have to confront our own internal arrogance or discrimination.

Representing Buddhism as a whole is well beyond me, however, I would like to say that I understand the Dalai Lama is active in the interfaith world and in fact dedicated an interfaith temple in the US heartland and urged people of all religions to stick to their principles of love, understanding and brotherhood.

Here in New Zealand, we of SGI had the privilege in 2003 of bringing out Aran Gandhi, Gandhi's grandson, a Gandhian and Lawrence Carter, Dean of the Martin Luther King International Chapel at Morehouse College a Baptist preacher. They came for the opening of the Morehouse college exhibition *Gandhi, King, Ikeda A legacy of building peace* – The opening was held next door in the banquet hall and amongst others Dean Carter honoured the prophets of Parihaka; Te Whiti o Rongamai and Tohu Kakahu here in these parliament buildings. The point of the exhibition was to emphasize that individuals can and do make a difference. The three men highlighted by the exhibition were of different faith traditions, ethnicities and continents and yet they all came to the same conclusions about humanity and non-violence.

I would also like to take the opportunity to again thank the various faith groups who came on board and supported us with the exhibition at that time.

There were public meetings around the country and many people were really inspired by the Gandhian and the Baptist organized by the Buddhists. What the two gentlemen were speaking about emanated from their very being. They were living, being the change they wished to see.

Prior to that in 1999, we organized for the *World Boys and Girls Art Exhibition* to be shown at Capital E with 400 artworks from children of 161 countries. While not interfaith the message absolutely was one of shared and common humanity.

Currently, you may be aware that the Peace Foundation is coordinating an effort to have the Wellington City Council declare Wellington a Peace City. This is an initiative promoted by UNESCO through the United Nations. It is hoped that this will be declared in May. At that time we are hoping to coincide a showing of the exhibition *Building a Culture of Peace for the Children of the 21st Century*. You can see information on this exhibition at www.CultureofPeaceExhibit.org.

It includes eight U.N Action Areas for a Culture of Peace

- Fostering a culture of peace through education
- Promoting sustainable economic and social development
- Promoting respect for all people
- Ensuring equality between women and men
- Fostering democratic participation
- Advancing understanding, tolerance and solidarity
- Supporting participatory communication and the free flow of information and knowledge
- Promoting international peace

As well as sections on Barriers to Peace, Paths to Peace, Religions and Peace and Peace Builders. Together with the U.N. Culture of Peace Program, the exhibit promotes a comprehensive and inclusive framework that fosters thinking, commitment and action for peace.

Anyone wanting to find out more or wanting to get involved please let me know at wgtn.center@sginz.org.

Thank you for your long attention and enjoy your day.