

The Third Historic Peace Churches International Conference

The Third Historic Peace Churches International Conference met in Solo, Indonesia 2 – 7 December 2007 to consider injustice, religious pluralism and poverty in an Asia context. Gerry Guiton, Dale Hess, Sieneke Martin and Jo Vallentine represented Friends from Australia. Jarrod McKenna, former Donald Groom Fellow, describes himself as part of the Emerging Peace Church, and was part of both the Friends' delegation and the Australian and New Zealand Anabaptist Association's delegation. There were Friends also from the United Kingdom, Aotearoa/New Zealand, India and the Philippines. Most of the participants arrived on 1 December and were able to spend time with local congregations before the conference proper started.

The first meeting of the historic peace churches took place in Kansas in the 1935 to plan how to respond for conscientious objection to the looming threat of World War II. After the war there was a series of meetings in Puidoux, Switzerland, on Lake Geneva in which Don Durnbaugh and John Howard Yoder played key roles. Don edited the papers and published the results from these meetings in a book, *On Earth Peace*.

Under its Decade to Overcome Violence program, the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC) asked the Historic Peace Churches (HPCs) to submit a theological rationale for their non-violence and pacifism and an understanding of the practical measures taken in the field by the HPCs which directly addressed various forms of violence and injustice. This program of the WCC arose largely due to the work of Don Miller (general secretary of the Church of the Brethren at the time) and others working behind the scenes.

In response, two conferences of the HPCs have been held so far. Each has explored commonalities and how 'peace' theological thinking had developed. The conference took place at the Mennonite Theological Seminary at Bienenberg in Switzerland in 2001 from which emerged *Seeking Cultures of Peace: a Peace Church Conversation* (ed. Fernando Enns *et al.* Cascadia and WCC, 2004). The second conference occurred near Nairobi in August 2004 entitled *Watu Wa Amani – People of Peace*. From Nairobi came the book entitled *Seeking Peace in Africa: Stories from African Peacemakers*. A similar book is planned for the Asian conference and Don Miller, Gerry Guiton and Paulus Widjaja will edit it.

There will be a fourth preparatory conference to be held in Latin America in 2010. Gerry has been asked to help with the organisation of it. Then in 2011 there will be a large final conference to mark the end of the Decade to Overcome Violence and to summarise our response to the WCC.

The papers and summaries of the previous two conferences can be found from:

http://www.peacetheology.org/index_b.html

<http://www.peacetheology.org/>

There were thought-provoking presentations at the Solo conference, beginning with the sermon at the opening worship service by Dr. Mesach Krisetya, Indonesia Council of Churches. He reminded us that we should engage in Worship, not Warship. Expanding on the "swords into ploughshares" theme, he remind us that wealth, prestige, power are all swords and that we should use worldly benefits to witness for peace, to be prepared to sacrifice wealth and comfort for others' sake. He strongly emphasised the importance of service to others, and humility. We were left wondering how many swords we carry, and were challenged by the question of how to deal with them. As Jeanne Jantzi, a young Mennonite woman working for the Mennonite Central Committee, said towards the end of the gathering: "some of us are burdened by poverty; others are burdened by affluence."

Hansulrich Gerber, a Mennonite who heads the World Council of Churches Decade to Overcome Violence Program, gave the keynote address. He drew upon the first-ever world report on violence and health conducted by the World Health Organisation:

(http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/en/).

It has some startling conclusions: An estimated 1.6 million people lose their lives each year due to physical violence; 50% is self-directed (suicides and self abuse); 30% to interpersonal (family/partner, community); 20% collective (social, political, economic, armed conflict). This challenges us to think about the causes of violence, and what we can do to offer hope to those in despair, to learn and teach nonviolent ways to transform conflict and to address gender equity.

Hiro Kantano, a Mennonite from Japan, talked about the way that both the perpetrators and victims of violence suffer and used the example of the Jews and Palestinians. Both sides are in pain and are suffering. Hiro asked the question, can their common suffering become a ground to build peace?

The topic of religious pluralism was discussed by Dr. Aristarchus Sukarno, an Indonesian Mennonite. He distinguished between toleration of others to maintain peaceful relations (a passive approach), and religious pluralism which actively engages with spirituality in a diverse environment and nurtures and re-energises our identity. This idea challenged many at the conference, including Friends from the Philippines, a predominantly Christian country, and Mennonites, Quakers and Brethren in predominantly Islamic and Hindu countries, where they struggle on the edge of the Christian sector.

Ashok Solanky, Brethren pastor from India, addressed the issue of poverty. He spoke in Gujarati and Darryl Sankey, Brethren member of the Organising

Committee, translated. He addressed the need to help the poor and to give from our wealth.

Christina Gibb, a Friend from Aotearoa/New Zealand, was on her way home from serving with the Christian Peacemakers Team in Hebron. Her slides powerfully conveyed the tensions and struggle for justice in that region.

The Australian Quaker contribution: Dale Hess gave a talk providing a theological framework for our work on injustice, religious pluralism and poverty. He related the ideas of the theologian Walter Wink with the analyses of Robert Jewett, David Korten, Rob Burrowes and others. Sieneke Martin talked about strategic nonviolence training conducted for West Papuans in PNG. A group of West Papuans, incorporating members from the armed resistance as well as those committed to nonviolence, came together to learn methods of nonviolence and how to develop their own strategic ideas to bring together their aspirations for the future of West Papua. Jo Vallentine and Jarrod McKenna, outlined their proposal for the *Vine and Fig Tree Planters Project*. They want to link climate change with peace conversion of the military. The military is among the greatest contributors to climate change. What would happen if its resources were channeled into human security by protecting the environment? They hope that others will join them in this effort to transform the work of the military. Gerry Guiton was heavily involved in the conference organising. For him it meant late meetings to discuss plans for the next day and giving up sleep to write draft papers for climate change and a summary paper for the conference and have them ready for the next day's plenary session.

In addition to the plenary sessions we met in small groups, each of which included all the denominations, to explore some thought-provoking questions and then to report back to the main group. The UN IPCC Conference on Climate Change was meeting at Nusa Dua, Bali, at the same time as our conference. The HPCIC Conference sent them a letter, encouraging them in their important work and offering our prayerful support for a significant outcome.

There were not as many Mennonite and Brethren women participants at the conference as we would have liked. However the women who came provided able leadership. Betty Pulido, Quaker from the Philippines, Manjula Roul, Brethren from India, Janet Scott, FWCC representative from the UK, and Elizabeth Duke, Quaker for Aotearoa/New Zealand, facilitated sessions, Janti Diredja, Mennonite from Indonesia, led the final worship, and Lydia Tabingo, Quaker from the Philippines, played keyboard accompaniment for the worship.

Hezbollah militants swept hotels in Solo (including the Lor-In where we met) at the time of the start of the War in Afghanistan; they were looking for Australians. Peacemaking networking activities since that time, involving the Mayor of Solo and local Muslim youth groups, have built harmonious relationships and the

Mayor and prominent Muslims participated in the opening ceremony of the conference and were honoured for their work.

Together we explored the human potential

- We listened to each other
- Laughed together
- Wept together
- Danced together
- Quakers re-arranged the chairs (again)
- At times we were insensitive and asked for forgiveness; and at times we were sensitive and supported one another
- There was a diversity of backgrounds and experience (many were travelling overseas and to a conference for the first time)
- We visited cultural sites and attended pageants
- Met local dignitaries

We explored spirituality

- There was a diversity of theologies
- We sang together
- We listened to spiritual music and clapped together; heard local choirs and singing groups
- Participated in new liturgies
- Gained a better appreciation of how to engage in those things that unite us
- We were challenged by the theology of peace and nonviolence

We were moved by the stories

- The Mennonite Central Committee is reaching out to Abu Bakar Bashir and Jemaah Islamiyah, and Hezbollah; this has required persistence over years
- We heard of churches being closed, and members bashed by fanatics
- Difficulties of surviving as a member of a tiny minority religion
- We learned of a young daughter who retreated into depression because of discrimination
- We were moved by the presence of young orphans from the massacre in Ambon coming to our closing ceremony in spite of the recent death of one of their members due to leukemia and one member becoming serious ill with a brain hemorrhage
- We heard about the large number of suicides by farmers unable to pay back money-lenders when their crops failed because of lack of rain

- We were inspired by young people giving blood and making it available to all who need it, regardless of religious faith
- Stories of wage poverty and discrimination in the workplace brought another dimension to our understanding of poverty
- Violence to brides-to-be associated because of their parents' inability to pay for a dowry for them
- In the midst of these challenges we heard stories about building peace through reaching out with love
- Organising programs for free interocular lens transplants for poor villagers
- We shared the organisational weaknesses of our churches and the challenges we face

Changed Lives

- At least three young men were clearly changed during the conference with the Spirit broadening their understanding and outlook; one man, who had never considered the peace dimensions of the Gospel message before, is going to pursue a Master's Degree in Peace Studies

A conference such as this requires years of planning and fund-raising, and overcoming of enormous obstacles. We would particularly like to thank the planning committee and the local organising committee. At times, even as recent as two weeks before the conference, the problems looked so overwhelming that the conference would have to be called off, but the way opened and the conference did take place.

Our hosts in Indonesia were absolutely wonderful in taking care of us. Their planning and generosity in every way made the conference a tremendously rich experience.

Gerry Guiton, Dale Hess, Jarrod McKenna, Sieneke Martin, Jo Vallentine