

PROMOTION OF CONSTRUCTIVE INTERFAITH DIALOGUE, CONSULTATION, AND EXCHANGE

INTRODUCTION

Interfaith relations in pluralistic societies varies. Whereas some enjoy peaceful co-existence and even collaborate with each other, in other societies, religions are hostile to each other. While some societies practice one religion, others are pluralistic in the sense that, their members practice and belong to various religions in those societies where religions are hostile to each other. Our gathering is a testimony to this fact. Peaceful interfaith relationships have grown over the years ensuring that constructive interfaith dialogue, consultation and exchange are practiced. This is the basis for my presentation.

This presentation will highlight issues that generate constructive interfaith dialogue, consultation and exchange and how best this can be achieved. It will draw on the Sierra Leone experience as an example of one of the leading countries in interfaith peaceful co-existence. In Sierra Leone, there are two main religions (Islam and Christianity) but there is also African Traditional Religion (ATR) that serves as the religious basis of the cultures in Sierra Leone.

ISSUES RELATED TO CONSTRUCTIVE INTERFAITH DIALOGUE, CONSULTATION AND EXCHANGE

Religious practices and beliefs are diverse. Some are such that they cannot tolerate relationship with people of other religions. Others encourage constructive dialogue, consultation, and exchange on issues especially in the following areas:

- 1. SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES:** These issues include the provision of education, health facilities, political organizations such as democracy, sharia law, resolving peace and conflict and human right related issues including gender based violence, early marriage of the girl child, and teenage pregnancy.
- 2. RELIGIOUS PRACTICES:** such as marriage, funerals, religious festivals such as Ramadan, Christmas, Esther, etc. Place and manner of worship.
- 3. ECONOMIC AND EMPLOYMENT ISSUES:** That is, whether or not Christians/Muslims should be employed in organizations/institutions they do not belong.

The above-mentioned issues and many others are very critical for peaceful constructive interfaith relationship. Constructive interfaith dialogue, consultation and exchange are therefore useful/vital tools for peaceful religious co-existence.

- Dialogue is conversation and exchange of opinions and ideas between two or more people.
- Consultation is conferring and deliberating with others to reach an agreeable logical conclusion.

Exchange on the other hand is giving one thing in return for another.

Religion expresses beliefs, practices, opinions and ideas about the supernatural being. It will be expected that such beliefs, practices or opinion and ideas opposes one another. These calls for recognition and respect for these differences for a peaceful co-existence. This is what many nations have succeeded in doing as a necessity. I am proud to say that Sierra Leone is one of the leading nations all over the world in this regard.

Sierra Leone is a small country on the West Coast of Africa with a population of about six million people.

The Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL) is an interfaith organization that was formed to promote peaceful coexistence and collaboration amongst the various religions. It was formed at a time of dire need of the people of Sierra Leone when it seemed like every effort to bring peace to the then war-torn country was unsuccessful. This particular form of interfaith collaboration, was a novelty as it had not yet be done in many parts of Africa or in the world in the sense that leaders of various religions committed themselves to working together to find a lasting solution to a conflict that had endangered so much destruction to life and property. Further more, this collaboration in favor of finding lasting solution to the Sierra Leone conflict, enhanced better understanding and comprehension of each other.

Through Constructive interfaith dialogue and consultations amongst the leaders of the two main religions (Christianity and Islam), the IRCSL was able to establish a dialogue forum between the government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front which eventually led to the signing of the Lome' Peace Accord in 1998 and the ending of the war in 2002. Thanks to this crucial intervention of the IRCSL. The Council was entrusted the responsibility to serve as "**MORAL GUARANTOR**" of the Lome' Peace Accord and its implementation.

Perhaps some one at this meeting may be wondering how leaders of two different religions were able to work together to accomplish such a monumental task of conflict resolution. The answer is, constructive interfaith dialogue and consultation.

Please permit me now to share some experiences in Sierra Leone how we have been able to achieve peaceful interfaith co-existence.

Both religions (Christianity and Islam) are aware of their responsibility to provide social services for their people such as education and health. Infact, There are more schools and hospitals owned by religious organizations than government. In these institutions, there is an exchange of personnel in delivering services, resources and beneficiaries with little or no barriers. Christian doctors, nurses, or teachers for example can serve in Islamic institutions, verse versa. Pupils can attend schools of other religious organizations and are encouraged to take part in their religious activities. For example, my mission, The Wesleyan Church of Sierra Leone own hospital some times offer free treatment for patients who cannot afford to meet their medical bills including Muslims. Best of all examples, my official mission driver as Head of denomination is a Muslim and both of my parents are devout practicing Muslims. There are exchanges of gifts during religious festivals such as Christmas and Ramadan. There is always enough food on my table during Pray Day, food coming from Muslim fiends. Religious leaders are often invited to attend religious festivals and deliver fraternal greetings.

There have been isolated cases of tensions between some religious institutions based on ignorance and fanaticism. However, the IRC SL through constructive interfaith dialogue sessions with the grieved parties were able to surmount such threats to religious co-existence.

- Muslims and Christians live in the same community and co-sharing community facilities such as recreational centers, health, cemeteries, etc.
- The use of common places for worship by both religions.
- Inter marriages at local and national levels between members of the opposite religions.
- In national politics, the two highest offices of the land are co-handled by representatives of the two major religions. For example, if the President is a Christian, his running mate or Vice President is automatically going to be a Muslim. Same for most Ministries, Departments and Agencies.
- Muslims and Christians can jointly own a business enterprise and work together for economic development of the country.
- Religious tolerance and respect for religion demonstrated by pagan worshippers and masquerades.

CHALLENGES

1. Still trying to persuade people who have wrong ideas of religious collaboration. That is, as a part towards syncretism or because of some stereotype knowledge of religious intolerance in other countries.
2. How to deal with some religious groups who are working in clandestine manner to undermine the religious tolerance we have enjoyed.

3. How to handle struggles amongst religious leaders on issues like identity, participation and inclusion.
4. How to deal with the infiltration of political influence on religious leaders and the lack of cooperation of some politicians in addressing issues perceived as opposed to the interest of their party.
5. The lack of resources that would enable organizations of religious leaders such as the Inter- Religious Council of Sierra Leone to function efficiently.

RECOMMENDATIONS.

1. Embark on a comprehensive sensitization on the value of religious tolerance. Unity and peaceful co-existence of interfaith forums can foster peace in any community or country.
2. To encourage countries known for religious intolerance to be aware of the far reaching implications for their practices on their citizens.
3. The creation of enabling environment for inclusive participation of all faiths in issues related to national development.
4. Successful interfaith councils be empowered to share the fruits of their practical workable examples of peaceful co-existence and promotion of national peace with others.
5. Develop code of conduct for religious groups and their members to serve as terms of reference in moments of religious tensions and conflicts.
6. International organizations working on world religious peaceful co-existence, help to either provide or facility the acquisition of resources for interfaith councils for efficient functioning.

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