

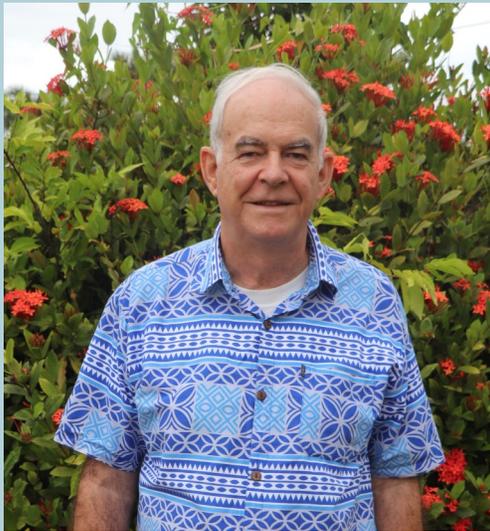


MISSIONARY SOCIETY OF SAINT COLUMBAN

REGION OF OCEANIA

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

“A LIFE UNLIKE YOUR OWN MAY BE YOUR TEACHER”



Fr. Frank Hoare
Columban Deputy Leader, Fiji

Fiji is an ideal place for interreligious dialogue. A number of world religions are found here with many denominations within these. According to the 2007 census (the latest for which we have statistics) Christians account for 65% of the population. Among the many Christian denominations the Methodist Church is the largest (34.6%). The Catholic Church (9.1%), Assembly of God Church (5.7%), Seventh Day Adventist Church (3.9%) have substantial numbers of adherents. Hindus make up 27.9% of the population and Muslims 6.3%. There are small numbers of Sikhs and Bahai.

Despite Methodist fundamentalism, which was prominent in the early coups d'etat, and the intolerant preaching of some of the newer Christian groups, people in Fiji are generally tolerant. Diwali is widely celebrated and Prophet Mohammed's Birthday is also a national holiday.

Interfaith Search Fiji was established after the first coup in 1987. It was the first formal organized effort at interfaith dialogue. It has continued to meet until now and gained public prominence on some National ceremonial occasions. From 10 to 20 members meet monthly to listen to scriptural presentations from representatives of different religions on various topics.

Columbans have engaged in grassroots dialogue for many decades. They have visited temples, mosques and Gurudwaras. They engaged in religious discussions with Hindu monks. They have participated in religious conversations in that most ubiquitous of Fiji locations – the around the yaqona bowl. No doubt a future newsletter will look back in time to some of these historical efforts and to the thinking that resulted from them.

However, this first newsletter celebrates one year of the Columban Interfaith Desk. Ms Priscilla Magdalin was employed by the Columbans in May 2019 and Fr Frank Hoare was asked by the then Columban Regional Director to plan activities with her. From the beginning they decided not to duplicate what Interfaith Search Fiji was doing. They concentrated instead on bringing young people from different religions together to encourage understanding, respect and dialogue among them. We began with social and environmental activities and then invited sharing on religious practices and festivals. By God's grace these efforts have been very enjoyable and successful and we look forward to further developments in the future.

In this report then we share with you some of the activities undertaken during the past year.

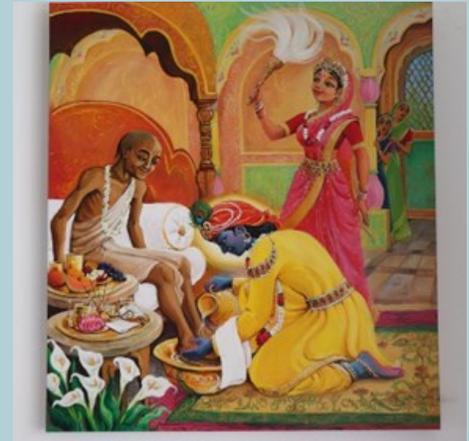
IRD Coordinator : Priscilla Magadalin
Email : columbanirdfj@gmail.com

Columban Mission Office
Phone : (679) 3308290
Mobile: (679) 9070638

Address: 119 Queen Elizabeth Drive
Nasese, Suva, Fiji

A HOLY PILGRIMAGE

On 1st June 2019, we organized our initial event - a one-day religious Pilgrimage for about 30 Catholics. Among them were religious, priests, seminarians, lay missionaries, and youths. We visited 5 religious places of worships. Our aim was to create awareness, understanding and respect for others' religion. Beginning with prayer and hymns the group walked from one location to the next in central Suva. A religious leader in each temple explained some of their teachings and practices. We respected each temple by removing shoes outside and, in the case of the Sikh temple covering our heads.



Washing of feet painting at Hari Krishna Temple

After the pilgrimage, we had a greater appreciation of the diverse ways of worship in Fiji. We were impressed by the faith and devotion of other believers. The religious pilgrimage gave us respect for people of other faiths, and it challenged us to a deeper faith and practice of our own faith.



Pilgrims at the TISI Sangam Temple

This was the first such experience for most of the pilgrims. We asked many questions about the doctrines and ritual. We found a commonality in much of the ethical teachings. We were impressed by the seriousness of the meditation of the Bramha Kumaris, by the intense hymn singing of the Hari Krishna, by the variety of Images in the Sangam temple, and the reverence for the holy book among the Sikhs. We concluded our pilgrimage with a short scripture reading, a decade of rosary and a hymn inside the Sikh



Religious Leader at Shri Satya Sai Temple



Pilgrims at the Shri Sanatan Dharm Temple



“The Catholic group walked from one place of worship to another in downtown Suva.”

MULTI-RELIGIOUS YOUTH CLEAN-UP CAMPAIGN—20th JULY 2019

Global warming and the threat of climate change affects us all. No religious believers are spared. It is an ideal sphere for joint action among all religions. Our second project was to organize an inter-religious clean-up along the sea-front in Nasese, Suva in July. The aim of the project was to increase awareness of the need to protect and care for the ocean and our environment generally. The 50 to 60 young people involved were Muslims, Methodists, Hindus and Catholics from three parishes (including Columban lay missionaries and seminarians). We began the afternoon with briefing and a prayer praising Gods love in creation. The youths were guided by Fr. Frank Hoare, Fr. Carlo and Ms. Priscilla Magdalin.



Youths from different faith denominations



Cleaning up the foreshore at Nasese

The youths who participated shared the need to care for our common home, mother earth, for this and future generations by working together as a community. This joint action was an excellent way to impress on us the negative impacts of litter and how we can help make a small difference by respecting and caring for our local environment. It was encouraging see youths of different religions supporting each other. The clean-up campaign came to an end with a prayer that was led by one of Muslim lady after which we all joined in shared refreshments.



Youths from St Pius X Parish, Raiwaqa in action



Faith In Action

MULTI-RELIGIOUS YOUTH SOCIAL/SPIRITUAL GATHERING

On 5th October 2019, this desk organized an Interreligious Social and Spiritual Youth Event in the Columban parish of Raiwaqa to make the movement more widely known. Performances (including hymns, dances, role plays and power point presentations) were given by members of seven faith groups: Islam, Hare Krishna, Sanatan Dharm, Arya Samaj, Sikhism, Shri Satya Sai and Catholicism. About 60 people attended. There were short talks on the 5 pillars of Islam, the principles of Satya Sai teaching, and talks on creation and saying no to drugs. These were mixed with cultural and spiritual items performed in traditional costume. It ended with a closing prayer and shared refreshments.



Sanatan youths shared their talents and faith



Our Lady of Fatima Parish, Nadera youths perform a liturgical item



Two Muslim ladies shared their traditions and culture.



Group photo of youths of different faith denominations

MULTI—RELIGIOUS YOUTH CHRISTMAS EVENT

A multi-religious youth pre-Christmas event was held on the 14th of December on the theme: “To Become Peacemakers in our Community and in our Nation.” About 150 participants witnessed seven religious groups present cultural items through music and art, carol singing, dances and role plays on the Christmas message of peace. Different groups brought out the meaning of Christmas for them in presenting the message of love and forgiveness, peace and harmony, and justice and truth. The program concluded with a closing prayer after which all enjoyed shared vegetarian refreshments.

Fiji has a long tradition of the religious festivals of the major religions being celebrated in some way by all. The Hindu feast of Diwali and the Muslim feast of Prophet Mohammed’s Birthday as well as Christmas and Easter are national holidays. It is a sign of religious tolerance and a peaceful society. It was a very touching experience for many to experience different religious groups presenting a message of peace, hope and good news to be shared by all. “We are here to desire peace, to promote peace, to be instruments of peace.”



Sanatan Dharm youths sharing their talents



Multi—cultural Centre youths performing a Christmas drama.



Children of Holy Eucharist Parish, singing a Christmas carol



Tradition and culture shared with different faith communities

MULTI—FAITH YOUTH PRESENTATIONS ON FASTING

The Hindu feasts of Shiv Ratri, Holi and Ram Naumi, the Muslim feast of Id ul Fitra and the Christian feast of Easter with related fasting all occurred in the first half of 2020. The Columban Interfaith desk, Fiji invited various faith groups to share on fasting: Why, How and with What Benefit.

The Satya Sai representative shared that fasting is a powerful act of purification and provides strength in trials. The Hindu groups also mentioned that devotees fast on different days of the week according to their particular devotion – Monday, Tuesday or Friday. Fasting is also associated with Hindu festivals.

Youths from the Baha'i Faith spoke of their sunrise-to-sunset abstinence from food. It is one of the important obligations of a Baha'i and supplemented with prayer it gives strength to soul and bring the person closer to God. The group concluded by singing a sad Fijian chant to "the Son of God."

The three youths from Centenary Methodist Church said that fasting reveals our inner sinfulness, strengthens our friendship with God and heals the hurt we have caused others. There are two types of fasting for them: Daniel fasting - only fruits, nuts and vegetables and whole grains for 21 days and Esther fasting for 3 days.

Youths from the Islam community shared that the Ramadan fast is not just from food but from anger, hatred and selfishness and is a time to give alms as a sign of solidarity with the poor.

A young Catholic teacher shared that fasting is always accompanied by prayer to be effective. It is a healing process that helps her to be more patient in her work. We detach ourselves from the material world and from egoism to focus on the onward journey in search of God.

The Hare Krishna group provided a vegetarian meal for all and accompanied it by singing kirtans. Fr. Frank Hoare thanked the groups for their sharing.



Youths from Islam, Hari Krishna, Sanatan Dharm, Sai Baba, Baha'i, Methodist and Catholic communities attended.



Religious denominations sharing their experiences on practice of fasting in their traditions



Group of women attended an interfaith event with Fr. Iowane Gukibau

ZOOM 1 INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE -12th May 2020

Because of Covid-19 restrictions on gatherings of people, the Columban Interfaith Desk contacted youth representatives of various religious communities and invited them to participate in a ZOOM exchange. People in Fiji had, for the first time ever, experienced fear and loss without the solace of praying in their places of worship. The participants in the ZOOM exchange were asked then to share how the lockdown and restrictions on public worship had affected them. Fr. Frank Hoare in hosting the exchange welcomed the participants, mentioned that it was a new initiative and invited the participants in turn to share their spiritual experience of the lockdown.

Asheeta Sharma of the Shri Sanatan Dharm said that her usual worship was not affected much as she normally prays and worships at home. However, the 9 days celebration of Ram Navami, which occurred during the restrictions, was affected. It can be celebrated in a temple or individuals may invite other devotees to meet at their home and after the worship, share *prasad* and food, contributed by the host. On the final day, ladies push the cradle in which the statue of the baby Rama is placed. They sing devotional songs as a mother coaxing a child to sleep. Asheeta's family preformed this ritual at their home together with the prescribed prayers.



Asheeta Sharma of the Shri Sanatan Dharm

Loata Manu of the Bahai faith spoke of celebrating the 12 days feast of Ridvan by ZOOM this year. It is Bahai's greatest festival and celebrates Baha'u'llah's self-manifestation as divine in 1863. This year different families said prayers and chants during the 40 minutes of the ZOOM session. This was not possible in the rural areas where internet is not reliable. Some local and national spiritual assemblies were organized by Skype and Google net. These were extended to include members from Tonga and the Marshall Islands.

William Damudamu of the Anglican Church is the son of a former Anglican Priest. Through the Covid-19 lockdown and restrictions the worship of God became more personal for him. Closed churches did not deter him but he connected with other Anglicans through Facebook and Messenger. His father encouraged the family to adapt the traditions of Palm Sunday and Easter to home celebration. So they decorated their home with palms on the Sunday, took turns in holding vigil during Maundy Thursday night and meditated on Jesus' seven words from the cross on Good Friday. For him it was a historic experience of bringing Church to the family home this year.



William Damudamu of the Anglican Church

Harmit Singh of the Sikh religion said that Sikhs celebrated the feast of Baisakhi by live streaming on social media. Gurbani was recited at home with family. Clips from YouTube and other resources were shared among devotees. Guru Nanak said that if we conquer the mind we can conquer the world and that remains true in these difficult times.



Harmit Singh of the Sikh Religion

Titilia Tabua of the Roman Catholic Church and a youth of Sacred Heart Cathedral was the last speaker. She spoke of the value of the 9.00 a.m. Mass on TV1 every Sunday and the 5.00 p.m. live stream Mass on Facebook. Her nieces and nephews got to know the drill. They dressed in their best clothes and reminded everyone to be in front of the TV by 9.00 a.m. on Sundays. The lockdown provided her with an opportunity to reflect on her life and faith. Small Christian Communities in the parish used Viber and Messenger to share on the bible. Without external distractions she read the bible more than previously. Social media too brought people together to share their experience.



Titilia Tabua of the Roman Catholic Church

Conclusion

After the initial round of sharing, all participants expressed their happiness at taking part in the ZOOM session. They noted that they all had many experiences in common, especially in becoming more aware of their personal faith and in using technology to share prayer, experiences and resources with other members.

Rahul Prasad of the Shri Satya Sai Organization missed the Sunday prayer, temple worship sessions, the small prayer meetings and the youth meetings which normally take place. It was a challenging time, for which people were not prepared. The main focus then was on home prayer which included readings from Sai Baba and prayer for the world. A devotional tool kit was developed and a folder of resources was uploaded onto Google Drive. This included Sai Baba literature and audio clips. Spirituality doesn't stop when temples are closed. Our bodies and our homes are also temples which we could inspect. Devotional sessions by ZOOM were held and people embraced technology in their search for God.



Rahul Prasad of the Shri Satya Sai Organization

ZOOM 2 INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE -28th May 2020

The Columban IRD Desk organized a second ZOOM exchange for Thursday night, May 28th, 2020. The theme selected was “Respect for Other Religions.” Ms Priscilla Magdalin facilitated the program and welcomed those taking part. Youth participants from the Anglican Church, Shri Sanatan Dharm, Satya Sai Organization and the Catholic Church shared teaching and insights from their sacred scriptures. Each one sang or recited a hymn or bhajan to end their sharing.

William, an Anglican, based his sharing on Jesus story of the Good Samaritan and accompanied himself on the guitar in singing a Fijian hymn, Sa Lomani Au. Asheeta, a Sanatan Hindu, quoted incidents from the Ramayan which oppose discrimination quoting a well-known Hindu saying which means that we don't know in what form God will meet us. Rahul, a devotee of Sai Baba, likened divine love to an electric current which energizes appliances in different ways according to their nature. Titilia, a Catholic, based her message of the equal dignity of male and female on Genesis 1:26-28 and she concluded with the Peace Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi.

It was notable that the young people on this occasion had grown in ease with each other and in presenting their messages. Fr. Frank Hoare thanked them for their insights. The session which took about 30 minutes concluded with a silent prayer for each other.

IRD GALLERY



Fr. John McEvoy (Columban Country Leader, Fiji) with 2 parishioners from St. Pius X Parish, Raiwaqa



Priscilla Magdalin (IRD Coordinator)



Religious Leader from TISI Sangam



Methodist youths sharing on fasting experience



Pilgrims at the Sikh Gurudwara Temple

IRD GALLERY



Pilgrimage walk visiting different worship places



Inter-Religious Social/Spiritual Event



Inter-Religious Youth Christmas Event