

EFFORTS FOR HARMONY AMONG RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

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NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR RELIGIOUS HARMONY, CBCI

1. The Commission for Religious Harmony, CBCI, New Delhi

The Commission for Religious Harmony, CBCI, New Delhi, is the official organization of the Catholic Christian community in India for promoting good relations with other religious communities and social groups. It is deeply committed to making a more harmonious society through walking and working together in life with people of all faiths and ideologies. The Commission takes care of relations with other faith communities (inter-religious dialogue) as well as with other Christian denominations (ecumenism).

2. Evolution in the Name and Concept of the Commission

The name of the Commission in the beginning was 'Commission for Dialogue with other religions and with Non-Believers' in 1966. The Commission was renamed 'Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue' since 1975. The name was further changed into 'Commission for Dialogue and National Desk for Ecumenism' in 2002. The name 'Commission for Inter-Religious Dialogue' and 'Commission for Inter-Faith Dialogue' were used informally since 1994. The name 'National Commission for Religious Harmony' has been used for external purposes with the informal consent for the Commission officials and in line with the consensus of the National Consultation of the Commission -- 2005. The relation with other Christians and the relations with other faith communities are taken care of by the present name of the Commission. The present name is in the process of being officially approved by the CBCI Meeting.

3. Historical Development of the Commission

The 'Commission for Dialogue with other religions and with Non-Believers' was created in 1966. The Commission had a full time Secretary/Director for the first time in January 1973. The Commission had with it some other concerns also like evangelization, proclamation and communication then. Over the years the Commission gained experience and thus received clarity of concept, focus and autonomy. Today the main concern of the Commission is 'dialogue with other faith communities'. It has attained a broader perspective as 'promoting harmony among faith communities'.

4. Present Arrangement for Inter-Denominational Dialogue or Ecumenism

The concern of Ecumenism of the Catholic Church has a different arrangement since CBCI Meet 2002. Three Commissions for Ecumenism were erected at Latin (CCBI), Syro Malabar (SMBS) and Syro Malankara (SMBS) Churches. They are responsible for the details of the ecumenical activities in the country. The National Desk for Ecumenism is responsible for only four areas. 1. Coordinating

the ecumenical activities of the above three Churches 2. Collaborating with other Christian bodies like NCCI and EFI 3. Taking up national issues related to the Christian community 4. Representing the country outside India on matters of Christian unity

5. National Office of the Commission

The National office of the Commission is situated at CBCI Centre, New Delhi. The office is equipped with the necessary furniture and staff. The assets, documents and files are systematically maintained, too. The chief executive office has a display of pictures of founders and places of worship of all religions and traditions, as a symbolic gesture of good will and respect for all faith traditions. The office has a catalogue of books, periodicals as well as other reports and documents of the Commission.

6. Network of the Commission Outside India

The international office of the Commission is ‘Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, Rome’. The ‘Office of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Affairs, FABC’, is the continental office. There is a ‘South-Asia Harmony Forum’ that is in the process for strengthening the South Asia networking. The national office of the Commission in India, obviously, is ‘Commission for Religious Harmony, CBCI, New Delhi’

7. Network of the Commission in India

1. National Commission at the national level 2. Regional Commissions at the level of 13 regions (some regions are comprised of a cluster of states and others have in it just one state each) 3. Diocesan Commissions at the diocesan level 4. Congregational or Provincial Units at the level of the congregations, provinces or regions 5. Dialogue/ Harmony Institutes and Centres (most of them are established by congregations and a few, by dioceses) 6. Harmony Forums (being launched at the national, regional, diocesan and city/town/district levels), Harmony Clubs (being launched at the level of schools and colleges) and Harmony Academies (being launched at the level of the major seminaries and major formation institutes)

8. Office Bearers of the Commission in India

The office bearers of the Commission at the national level are National Chairman, National Members (2) and National Director (Secretary). There is a Regional Chairman and a Regional Director (Secretary) at the regional level. The Diocesan Chairman of the Commission is the local Bishop himself. There is a Diocesan Director at the diocesan level. There are Directors of the Dialogue/ Harmony Centres. There are also Coordinators for Religious Harmony/Inter-Religious Dialogue at the level of the Congregations/Provinces/Regions. The Directors or Coordinators at diverse levels are the executives of the Commission in India.

9. Functioning of the Commission

National Consultations are a yearly feature since 2003 and are organized by the National Commission. Regional Consultations as a rule are organized on a half-yearly basis. The National Commission conducted one round of Regional Consultations in all twelve regions in 2004. The

Regional Director organizes the Regional Consultations in consultation with the National Director. The National Director participates in the same minimum once a year in all the regions. The National Director is by and large part of all the regional programmes in the capacity of a resource person. The National Director conducts seminars for different groups in Dioceses also, as per request. The National Director visits the Dialogue/Harmony Centres of the country and participates in programmes organized there.

10. Strengthening the Regional and Diocesan Structures

The Commission facilitated the appointment of Regional Directors from 7 to 12 regions in 2004. It followed up the appointment of Diocesan Directors from 36 to 82 % in 2004 and updated the list of Diocesan Directors through a survey in 2003. Because of transfers, change of the Directors at the level of the regions, dioceses and centres are part of the process. Initiatives of both regional and diocesan Directors are highly encouraged. The regional and local contexts, problems and concerns are taken in to consideration in planning and conducting the programmes of the dialogue and harmony. Facilitating the regions to develop a regional perspective of the mission is increasingly a leading point of reference.

11. Publication of Guidelines from the Commission

The Commission published ‘Guidelines for Inter-religious Dialogue’ in 1977. These Guidelines were revised and published in 1989. The Commission also published ‘Guidelines for Ecumenism’ in 2000. The ‘Guidelines’ elaborately describe the diverse dimensions of the inter-religious and inter-denominational mission respectively. Besides, the Commission released ‘National Ecumenical Guidelines’ in 2004, which was prepared in the National Ecumenical Consultation of CCBI, SMBS and SMBS Commissions for Ecumenism. This was intended for better coordination of activities among the Ecclesial Bodies for Ecumenism and the National Desk for Ecumenism.

12. Three Orientations of the Mission of the Commission

Promoting awareness in the diverse sectors of the Catholic community and empowering them for external relations is the primary concern of the Commission. Facilitating better understanding, collaboration and unity with people of other Christian denominations is the second area of focus. The details of this work are taken care of by the Ecclesial Commissions for Ecumenism. Networking with people of other faiths and ideologies through fostering creative interaction, better relations and joint action is the most important area of operation of the Commission. The first two areas remain to a great extent as preparatory for the third sphere. All the same, they are complementary to each other.

13. Shift of Emphasis in the mission over the Decades

When the inter-religious mission was initiated by the Catholic Church, it was only a theological endeavour. Today theological exercise is a concern of only a small section of the Church. Dialogue today needs a multi-disciplinary perspective. Theory gives way to a practical approach in this area. Together with the search for the deeper aspects in inter-religious dialogue, a multi-religious attitude has to be developed with its broader implications. The exercise of dialogue today has to be broadened from the religious campuses to non-religious and even secular circles. All perspectives are to be accommodated for making interaction effective. In fact, dialogue is not religion-centred; it is life-centred. Life is God’s gift; religion is intended to facilitate it. A journey from paralleling to

networking is the strongest inclination of the world today. Inter-religious dialogue has to proceed to a harmony vision and mission, in view of including all dimensions of the reality of life and of imbibing their broader implications.

14. Broadening the Scope of the National Commission

The Commission has been making sustained efforts for broadening the horizons of the Commission in concept, scope and outreach from 2003 onwards in special. The Commission constituted a 12-member National Consultative Committee for the Commission in 2005 for more effective planning of its activities. The Committee meets off and on for the above purpose. The Commission organized a National Training Seminar for Regional and Diocesan Directors in two shifts in 2005 for technically equipping and empowering the Regional and Diocesan Directors.

15. Formulation of the Vision Statement

The Commission formulated a Vision Statement for the Commission for the first time in 2005. The same reads as follows. ‘The Commission for Religious Harmony, CBCI, rooted in the values of Jesus and in response to the context of our times, envisions the emergence of a society, in which religious, racial, ethnic, cultural, ideological and other identities and traditions of India are accepted and promoted through creative interaction for the promotion of harmony and well being of all.’

16. The Panchsheel of the Harmony mission

The panchsheel (the five-dimensional concept and code of conduct) of the harmony mission is formulated as follows. ‘Sadbhaav (good will), Sambhaav (equal footing), Sammaan (respect), Sehyog (co-operation) and Samanvay (harmony)’. Harmony is end result and goal of the mission and dialogue is the means and process of interaction, friendly relations and cooperation. It is a ‘non-dominating style’ of ‘being present to the other’, ‘being a mirror to each other’, ‘walking together in life’ and ‘making a joint pilgrimage to God’. This is the vision and mission of harmony among faiths.

17. National Schemes for Empowering the Younger Generation for Social Harmony

The National Commission, in its National Consultation--2006, Bangalore, deliberated on the need of fostering awareness among the younger generation and on empowering them for the universal mission of promoting harmony in social life as well as among faith-based communities. This deliberation was intended for two sections of the younger generation, namely the religious youth in major seminaries and formation institutes and the secular youth in schools, colleges and universities. The Commission has evolved the following schemes in order to translate the above vision into a mission and has been in the process of implementing them.

The objective of the above schemes is ‘eliciting a new leadership in the youth’ through equipping them with awareness, motivation and commitment in the area of social and religious harmony. This, obviously, has to be one of the major concerns in the programme of education, especially today. Making a more harmonious society has to be the common motto of all faith-based communities and organizations. Fostering good will, understanding, friendly relations and collaboration among the different religious communities and social groups is the way for realizing the above goal. The global and communal challenges of the recent times call for innovative ways of networking the society beyond the scope of mere academic courses, as well. The schemes are the following.

1. Organizing joint academic programmes with universities for awareness building and motivation in universal values
2. Delivering extension lectures to the staff and students at major seminaries and formations institutes, with a proposal to launch 'harmony academies'
3. Delivering extension lectures to the staff and students at Departments of Religious Studies of Universities, with a proposal to take up field-based research of comparative nature
4. Delivering extension lectures to the staff and students at Colleges run by faith-based communities, secular foundations and government, with a proposal to launch 'harmony clubs'
5. Conducting motivational seminars for teachers of schools run by faith-based communities, secular foundations and government, with a proposal to launch 'harmony clubs'.
6. Addressing national organizations of educational, social and religious character, like Aiache, Ainacs, XBHE, AA, AICC and AICU on the above theme and seeking their collaboration in making a better society

18. Some Regular Schemes of the National Commission

1. Visiting leading places of worship/ places of importance of other faith communities
2. Interacting with leaders of other religious communities
3. Organizing get-togethers of leaders of religious communities
4. Holding gatherings of people of different professional and ideological affiliations
5. Organizing sensitizing sessions for the general public in peaceful co-existence, collaboration and harmony
8. Forming Study circles of people of different affiliations
9. Networking, interacting and collaborating with like-minded organizations and NGOs of other communities
10. Making personal friendships with people of other communities
11. Initiating multi-lateral dialogue with leaders and individuals of organizations and communities of conflicting ideologies
12. Interacting with the new religious traditions and minor communities as well as with traditional and major religious and social traditions
13. Considering the perspectives and concerns of the common folk in the harmony vision
14. Attempting to take the mission of dialogue and harmony to the grass roots of the society
15. Coordinating the harmony efforts of the Regions, Dioceses, Seminaries, Centres, Institutes and Congregations/Provinces/Regions
16. Networking with the harmony efforts of other Christian communities and other religious organizations
17. Participating in the celebrations of the religious festivals of other communities
18. Sending greeting cards to individuals and organizations of other communities on the occasion of their festivals
19. Conducting good will visits to persons of other religious communities at festivals and important occasions
20. Welcoming dignitaries of other religious communities in the office of the Commission and holding friendly interactions with them
21. Organizing friendly get-together of leaders of religious communities, social movements and civil institutes at Christmas
22. Maintaining close friendships with people of other religious communities

19. Some Special Schemes of the Commission

1. Composing and releasing an audio-CD album 'Samanvay-Dhaara' on multi-faith themes
2. Attending to communally disturbed situations in the country
3. Launching Harmony Forums at national, regional, diocesan, city/town/district levels
4. Giving interviews and messages on TV channels on 'harmony-related themes'
5. Giving interviews in print media on 'harmony-related themes'
6. Publishing articles in Books, Periodicals and News Papers on 'harmony themes'
7. Launching a Harmony Website of the Commission
8. Using art forms for promoting values of harmony in social life
9. Preparing a Book of Poems in Hindi on 'communal harmony', involving poets from all communities
10. Preparing a Book of Articles in English on 'harmony themes'
11. Preparing a Book of articles in Hindi on 'harmony themes'
12. Revising the Guidelines of the Commission
13. Organizing Multi-Faith Poetical Evening, involving poets from all faith communities
14. Organizing Multi-Faith Cultural Evening, involving students of schools run by different faith-based organizations
15. Motivating and involving more and more youth and women in the process of fostering harmony in social life
16. Initiating humanitarian activities on a joint basis with other faith communities
17. Initiating the national language 'Hindi' or the respective regional language in harmony programmes
18. Participating in and lecturing, both in Hindi and in English, at harmony programmes organized by institutes and organizations of other communities

20. Publishing a Multi-Faith Half-Yearly Journal 'Fellowship'

The Commission publishes a half-yearly journal 'Fellowship' for networking the religious and secular society and for disseminating the message of dialogue, harmony and fellowship. Fellowship is a unique journal of its own right in many respects, in the world of journalism as well as in the world of CBCI publications. It contains views, reviews, interviews, news, poems, quotes, role models, readers' comments, greetings and special features that involve diverse religious traditions and social communities. It interacts with people of diverse faiths, ideologies, cultures, classes, castes and professions as well as of ethnic, religious and social backgrounds.

Started in 1994 as a News Bulletin with a circulation of 800 copies in 2003, *Fellowship* is a multi-colour journal with a circulation capacity of above 10,000 copies today. Its contents and renewed formatting reflect a broader concept and outlook, as well. It networks individuals and institutions of all communities and sectors in India and outside. It reaches the local, regional, national and international centers of all the religious communities, schools, colleges & universities of the country, social & cultural institutes and NGOs of the country, state & central government offices, embassies, political leaders & parties and leading libraries of the country.

The Commission is making sustained efforts in following up its initiative of making *Fellowship* a collaborative endeavour of well-meaning scholars and leaders from diverse religious communities by way of literary contributions. The journal is in the process of being made a joint venture of well-meaning citizens from all communities by way of financial contributions as well, rather than being entirely managed by one organization or community. 'Patrons of Fellowship', 'Sponsors of

Fellowship’, ‘Friends of Fellowship’ and ‘Life Members of Fellowship’ are the leading schemes of the journal ‘Fellowship’. A ‘Fellowship Get-together’ of the literary and financial contributors of Fellowship and the collaborators of the harmony mission is visualized to be a yearly feature, too.

21. Proposed Schemes for the Regional Commissions

1. Having a Full-time Regional Director
2. Establishing a Regional Office, for a source of reference, resource materials, documentation and guidance
3. Erecting a Regional Committee of 5 to 10 members (Chairman, Director, 1 priest, 1 nun, 1 layman, 1 laywoman, 1 person from other Christian communities, 2 from other religious communities)
4. Conducting Regional Consultations on a half-yearly basis
5. Using the regional language as the medium of communication for programmes
6. Mobilizing Funds for the regional activities and for supporting participation in national programmes
7. Documenting the events of the region and erecting a file with related information and paper-cuttings
8. Sending yearly report to the National Commission
9. Ensuring the assistance of a Coordinator at the state level, wherever more than one state is involved in the ecclesiastical region
10. Visit by the Regional Director to all the dioceses of the region, preferably at least twice a year
11. Launching Regional/ State Harmony Forum (Executive Body and General Body)
12. Publishing a Regional News Bulletin for coordinating the efforts of the region
13. Organizing yearly Multi-faith events at the state/ regional level
14. Issuing a Pastoral letter by the Regional Chairman to all the dioceses and their institutions of the region for awareness building and motivation
15. Listing the experts and activists of the mission in the region, both in the Catholic community and in other communities
16. Organizing Yearly Regional Harmony Forums Meet
17. Producing literature on the Harmony Mission in the regional language (Christian and other)
18. Developing multi-faith schemes, in line with the challenges, problems, demands and needs of the region
19. Having a regularly updated Plan of Action to act on, on a short-term and a long-term basis

22. Proposed Schemes for the Diocesan Commissions

1. Establishing a Harmony Commission in the Diocese
2. Ensuring the appointment of a Diocesan Director for the mission
3. Erecting a Core group of the Harmony Forum of 5-10 persons (priest, nun, layman, laywoman + one/two from other Christian denominations + two/three from other religions)
4. Having a regularly updated Plan of action for the diocese, both on a short-term and a long-term basis
5. Visit by the Diocesan Director to all the districts, parishes and institutions of the diocese, preferably twice a year
6. Conducting yearly seminar for the diocesan community (priests, nuns and lay persons)
7. Organizing two major events at the diocesan level on a yearly basis, involving people of all communities, civil and religious leaders of the area
8. Broadening the Diocesan Harmony Forum with 25-50 persons
9. Delivering lectures at schools and colleges of the diocese to motivate the educational institutions on harmony perspective
10. Launching ‘Harmony Clubs’ in schools and colleges, involving teachers, students, parents and ex-alumni of the respective institution
11. Ensuring the necessary finance for supporting the programmes of the diocese and for supporting services from the region
12. Sending reports of the harmony efforts to the Regional Commission once a year
13. Sending reports of special events instantly to the regional and national offices
14. Circulating the Pastoral Letter of the Regional Chairman/ Diocesan Bishop to the parishes, institutions, religious houses, schools, colleges and other centres

15. Celebrating the religious festivals, involving people of all religious and social communities
16. Conducting multi-faith prayer at schools
17. Preparing and circulating literature on harmony vision and on inter-faith prayer
18. Training more and more leaders for the mission
19. Facilitating Christian schools and other institutions to get networked with those of other communities

23. The Commission to Facilitate Faith-based Organizations to Collaborate for Making a More Harmonious Society

Promoting harmony in the diverse dimensions of social life is real service of the society. Facilitating faith-based organizations to collaborate towards such a social orientation justifies the very relevance of faith in life. Making a better society or making a more harmonious society is the common mission of all faith-based organizations. Implications of the above harmony perspective of life would be getting creatively related to other communities while remaining rooted in one's own faith tradition.

Communities, especially faith-based communities, cannot exist today like islands. They cannot afford to travel like parallel lines. They have to join hands with each other to make the human society more worth living. The creation and all that is within it, especially the faith traditions, are the gift of the same Creator. They are the common cultural heritage of the human society. They shall not be divined as mine and yours. 'One mine in special and others also are mine in general'. This is the shared identity one has to grow towards, as individuals and faith-based organizations. Like the 'rainbow' integration and a spirit of 'complementariness' and 'togetherness' is the spiritual motto that will guide the destinies of the human society today and for the years to come. This is the sublime vision and noble mission the Commission for Religious harmony, CBCI, New Delhi, in diverse humble ways are deeply committed to.

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