

# Communiqué

## **WCC - CCA Consultation : 'Towards Social and Human Development in South Asia' 24 - 26 July 2002, Colombo, Sri Lanka**

*(The Consultation 'Towards Social and Human Development in South Asia' organised by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) in co-operation with the National Councils of Churches in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka was attended by forty participants - leaders of South Asian Churches, Officers of NCCs, CCA Officers and General Committee Members, WCC Central Committee Members, Ecumenical Partners from Europe and North America, Social Scientists and Development Analysts. The Consultation adopted the following Communiqué.)*

### **The South Asian Context**

We, the participants of the WCC-CCA Consultation 'Towards Social and Human Development in South Asia: Ecumenical Response', which was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka affirm that the basic concept of human development is a process of enlarging people's choices, expanding their capabilities and promoting freedoms. Essential choices include the capability to lead a long and healthy life, to acquire knowledge and to have access to resources needed for a decent standard of living. The choices include political freedoms, the ability to take part in the life of the community, preserving human dignity, having self-respect, guaranteeing human rights and gender equality. We believe that these indeed are marks of a humane society and therefore become the central thrust of Church's Mission in Asia.

The growth of per capita GNP, industrialisation, and technological advance are important only as instruments for human development. We regret that quite often the hallmarks of a humane society have been elusive to the South Asians mainly because of rising unemployment, worsening inequalities, growing poverty and deep human deprivations. Therefore, working towards peace, justice, human security and a compassionate society is central part of Christian discipleship, and our struggle to combat the growing malaise of deprivations that dehumanise people created in God's image become part of God's mission in Asia. In this context we are reminded of the words of the late Dr. Mahbub UI Haq, a prominent economist and development expert from South Asia, for whom human security is not weapons of war but "a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, an ethnic tension that did not explode, a dissident who was not silenced, a human spirit that was not crushed. The imperatives of this human security have become universal, indivisible and truly global today. The choice before us is simple: we can either learn to live together, or we can all die together."

South Asia is home to nearly one half of World's illiterates. Over 600 million or 40% of its population live on an income of less than one dollar per day. It is a blot on those who governed the region that there are more children out of schools in South Asia than in the rest of the world and more than 2/3rds of this wasted blossom consists of girls. The fact that over one fourth of the people of the South Asian region have no access to safe drinking water is a shameful reality. The colossal magnitude of human insecurity and deprivations makes South Asia the most vulnerable space on the globe today. Reckoned in terms of such scales of Human Development Reports as the Human Development Index, the Gender-related Development Index, the Gender Empowerment Measure and the Human Poverty Index, the region presents a bleak and shameful scenario. South Asia is fast emerging as the poorest, the most illiterate, the most malnourished, and the most deprived region in the whole world. Millions of South Asians carry the dehumanising burdens of poverty and despondency. Changing the content of GNP (increase in output of military hardware, salaries of soldiers, etc. increase GNP) and converting it for social wellbeing means reordering priorities. This is a moral question.

South Asia is also a region marred by ethnic tensions, religious fundamentalism, subversive activities, border disputes, cross border terrorism and blatant human rights violations. Practically every South Asian Country is plagued by various intra and inter state conflicts and crises based on the narrow considerations of caste, religion, ethnicity, language, community, etc; which distorts the national integrity, unity, peace, and security in the region. The system of governance has become unresponsive and irrelevant to the needs and the concerns of the people. Weak coalition governments in India, Sri Lanka and Nepal, which are unable to guarantee a full term in office; political demonstrations, violence and strikes, have also become a common phenomenon in South Asia. The peace and security of the region is also threatened by the nuclear arms race. In a region where soldiers out number doctors by twenty times, the distorted resources allocation and priorities threaten human security to the core in the sub continent.

The countries of South Asia have now taken to market mediated growth and economic reforms of global lending and trading institutions as a panacea to all their evils. All evidences we have now tell us in unmistakable terms that despite growth, South Asia's human deprivations, be it poverty and lack of basic

social amenities or unemployment, casualisation of labour, have become alarmingly critical. As a consequence of tax relief for the corporate sector and compulsion to reduce fiscal imbalances, governments have to cut social expenditures such as health, education, social security, public distribution system and the like.

The fast spreading HIV/AIDS now threatens the South Asian society critically. On a build-up to this Consultation there was a Consultation on 'An ecumenical agenda to combat HIV/ AIDS in South Asia', which was held on 24-25 July. This Consultation noted with great concern and a sense of urgency that the HIV AIDS situation is worsening in South Asia due to several underlying risk factors. South Asia has about 5 million HIV infected persons of the world's 34 million people living with HIV AIDS. The participants of the Consultation dismayed and discouraged by the lack of adequate response on the part of the churches in South Asia and also by the discrimination, the denial of human rights and the burden of stigma borne by those who are living with HIV/ AIDS. The Consultation recognised the untapped potential of the church to combat HIV / AIDS in various ways, and the unique and powerful opportunity it has to respond to this crisis. This consultation discussed the recommendations and endorsed the plan of action for future ecumenical involvement in this field which will ultimately equip the churches to respond to these crises.

Human development, we underscore, is a choice and not a chance or destiny and restructuring for people's wellbeing is a moral imperative of the present generation. Indeed the moment of reckoning has come to the ecumenical family to respond and act. The dehumanising situation in South Asia is not merely a moral challenge but a judgement on the so-called civilised society and religions, including Christianity, which try to take pride on their impact on spiritual, cultural and thought formation of Asians.

### **The Role of the Church and the Challenges to the Ecumenical Family**

In all South Asian Countries, Christianity is a minority religion. As a result of the resurgence of religious fundamentalism, peaceful co-existence of religious communities has come under threat. In spite of its minority status, the Church in various contexts has played the role of being a creative presence and exercised a ministry to empower the marginalised communities and to stand in solidarity with victims of injustice. We believe in a God of Creation and therefore affirm that God's presence and redeeming activities are not confined to the domain of the Church alone. Although God is not confined to the Church, God uses the Church, very often the obedient remnant within the Church to carry out God's mission of justice, peace and reconciliation. It is this theological foundation that under-girds and empowers the ministry of the Church to chose Life amidst forces of Death. When the Church anchors its mission and ministry on issues of Life, it has no choice but to unmask the principalities and powers of this world which try to deceive and appear to be God's will and providence to the poor, marginalised and people in despair.

In this context the Church is called to a ministry of discernment and prophesying. In other words, we believe that the ministry of peacemaking embodies the discernment of truth from falsehood, justice from injustice, reconciliation from impunity. This is the costly nature of God's ministry and we are called to exercise that ministry in partnership with God and people of diverse faiths. In fact the South Asian context invites the churches to go beyond the traditional and inherited models of ministry and be creative and innovative in shaping new models of ministry to meet emerging challenges and new situations.

The South Asian context also demands the churches to throw up creative and innovative leaders to move the institutionalised churches from the known to unknown frontiers of ministry. In order for the Church to embrace this new vision it must be rooted in the model of incarnation and be nurtured by a spirituality of self-emptying.

Given this background and the challenges faced by the churches in the Sub-continent of Asia it is important that the global ecumenical family enter into a partnership whereby an opportunity will be created for joint ecumenical actions, mutual exchange of resources and learning. Therefore, we recommend the global ecumenical family to initiate a common platform for the ecumenical family's future co-operation and programmatic involvement in the wider participation and joint actions which will help the people of South Asia to work towards social and human development. In order for this to ensue, we endorse the proposal that a common ecumenical endeavour be initiated - a South Asia Ecumenical Partnership Programme which will find out possibilities and mechanisms for specific expressions of our commitment and solidarity. We adopt the proposals of various working groups that the main thrust of the proposed ecumenical partnership programme to be focussed on the following key areas:

- Combating HIV/AIDS,
- Promoting Peace and Reconciliation,
- Nurturing Inter-Religious Co-operation,
- Capacity Building.

We also propose that the ecumenical partners and churches from the North and the churches and NCCs in South Asia develop a holistic approach to enter into a partnership with the people of South Asian region in order to accompany them in their struggle and search to recover their stolen human dignity and hope in life, which will overturn the colossal human deprivations in South Asia.

In order to initiate, facilitate and implement the programmes, we discussed a viable way and adopted the proposal of launching a South Asia Ecumenical Partnership Programme (SAEPP). We recommend that the forthcoming Consultation, 'Towards New and Effective Ecumenical Partnership in South Asia', which will be held in Geneva on 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of September should undertake the task of concretising an appropriate mechanism for the effective implementation of programmes.