keeping the faith:
A Multi-Faith Dialogue on Spirituality and International Development in the Current Global Context

May 6 & 7, 2008
Embassy West, Ottawa, Ontario

Keynote Speaker: Katherine Marshall
Senior Fellow and Visiting Professor at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University

Guest panelists examine the impact of faith on international development, including the environment, gender-equity and peacebuilding.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A multi-faith dialogue on spirituality and international development in the current global context was held on May 6-7, 2008 in Ottawa. The conference, chaired by Beverley Carrick of CAUSE Canada, examined the impact of faith and spirituality on international development.

Katherine Marshall, Senior Fellow and Visiting Professor at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, provided the keynote address. In her presentation, Katherine emphasized social change as a central element of development and the care with which people of faith tend to approach questions of ethics. She highlighted five paradigm shifts that have taken place in recent years:

- There is an appreciation that development is a complex, non-linear, multi-disciplinary area. Terms like empowerment, sustainability, and capacity represent a significant evolution in thinking.
- The world is constantly changing and cannot easily be divided into two or three categories; the language of development has mirrored this change.
- The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) represent a new kind of consensus. The new paradigm acknowledges that poverty can be alleviated and puts increased emphasis on respect for human rights.
- We now need to shift from poverty to equity, to go beyond eliminating misery to the concept of social justice and to imagine what kind of world would be fair.
- Finally, links between security and development have tightened since 9/11.

Katherine also spoke about the need for dialogue and cooperation between religious and secular development institutions. We work in a complex environment and need one another.

Faith-based Development NGOs in Canada – the Landscape. Ray Vander Zaag is a Professor of International Development Studies at Canadian Mennonite University. He presented the results of his research on faith-based development NGOs in Canada. Ray found that there are many ways that faith is expressed in development NGOs and that these organizations can be grouped into four categories: historical, faith-based humanitarian, transformative, and missional. This typology is valuable in that it helps to unpack the term “faith-based,” but dangerous because it classifies all organizations into boxes.

Conference participants saw themselves fitting into several categories of Ray’s typology, though most commonly identified themselves as “faith-based humanitarian.” Pressure points included: balance in internal and external relations, funding, communications, dealing with stereotypes, and ethics.

Role of Religion in Development. Pierre Beemans, a retired CIDA official with degrees in education and philosophy, Ida Kaastra Mutoigo, Executive Director of the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC), and Avrum Rosensweig, the Founding Director of Ve’ahavta, the Canadian Jewish Humanitarian and Relief Committee, each reflected on the role of religion in development.

Pierre explored the relationships between science, religion and development. He noted that faith-based organizations are often seen as sitting on the periphery in the development business. Yet many fundamental questions – human rights, ethical principles, relationship to the divine – are key to avoiding suffering in the individual and societal psyche. Pierre encouraged conference participants to remain true to their religious convictions.

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Ida considered how religious beliefs contribute to, or detract from, development. Faith adds values, spiritual concern, caring for others, and other traits essential for community development – even though the separation of faith and development are assumed. Faith also provides alternative approaches to development, giving us new definitions of what development really is, such as service and liberation. On the negative side, the combination of faith and development is, in some circles, considered dangerous.

Avrum said that as faith-based organizations, we have a responsibility to increase the volume of goodness, to share the goodness that lies inside of us. We can have people listening to what we are doing. He also said that we must give people the opportunity to travel, to experience, to share, to introduce ourselves to one another, to break down stereotypes and to show the good side of our religions. Development is a beautiful story of empathy. When we are studying religion, we are studying empathy.

During the discussion, a few important ideas emerged:

- A wise person is one who learns from everybody.
- If you come here to help me, you are not invited; if you come to share my life, come on in.
- We need to be genuine in our activities, to do what we do because we are all part of the same planet, because we want to make the world better. If we are saving anyone, we are saving ourselves.

**Day 1 Summary.** At the end of the first day of the conference, Katherine Marshall provided some reflections on the discussions that had taken place. She noted that the importance of integrity and honesty were issues that emerged again and again. Complexity, particularly as it relates to significant ethical choices, was another recurring theme. Inter-faith work, on the other hand, received very little attention.

**Gender Panel.** The discussion of gender and development featured presentations by Jennifer Harold, Director of Regional Programs and Strategy Division at World Vision Canada (WVC); Gul Joya Jafri, currently on leave from CIDA; Shrinath Prasad Dwivedi, Chair of the Global Hindu Foundation; and Susanne Tamás, Director of Governmental Relations for the Bahá’í Community of Canada.

Gender can be a sensitive issue in religious organizations. Jennifer discussed the difficulties women have in suggesting that they have a different experience of spirituality than men since men control the realm of spirituality. Men also control the realm of sexual relations. Women are seeking control in their spiritual and sexual relations as a way to become empowered. World Vision’s pilot project on gender relations training in the Congo explored the nature of brokenness in an effort to redeem gender relations.

Gul’s presentation explored the potential of faith-based organizations to promote gender equality in development practice by drawing on principles of equality from within faith traditions. She also asked what role faith-based organizations could play within Canada by challenging stereotypes about religion and women in the “Third World”, towards a focus on mutual respect and solidarity, by taking into account the larger political context and uneven global relations of power in which Islam is constructed as a foreign threat encroaching on the "civilized" West.

Shrinath’s presentation, prepared in collaboration with his brother, Dr. O. P. Dwivedi, focused on women and Hinduism. In the Hindu religion it is understood that where a woman is respected and honoured, there will be prosperity and peace, but where women are not respected, all actions will be in vain. The historical context of Hinduism played a defining role on the issue of gender equality. India’s independence brought social and political changes that favour women. The situation of women is changing, but this change is slow and there are still problems.

Susanne cited a Bahá’í representative, who, at a recent UN conference, stated that “religion is the source of development; it is the basis of all civilization and progress in the history of all human kind.” The Bahá’í approach to development is rooted in its religious teaching: every human being is created noble; the earth
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is one country and people; the human species as a whole is at the leading edge of an evolutionary process; women and men have been, and will always be equal in the sight of God. The success of a development initiative can be measured by the capacity of a community to address the next development challenge.

Three common themes emerged in the discussion of potential points of conflict between specific faith perspectives and gender sensitive programming: scriptural interpretations, cultural norms, and the consistency of the worldview held by a particular religion.

**Environment Panel.** Mohamed Bhabha has a long association with IDRF. Doug Brown is the Research Advisor to the Southern Africa Livelihoods Emergency Response at World Vision Canada. Heather Eaton is the co-founder of the Canadian Forum on Religion and Ecology (CFORE). Peter Timmerman is a leading Western Buddhist commentator. They each provided reflections on the environment and development.

Mohamed spoke about the influence of IDRF’s early work on the direction the organization has taken. One of its first projects, focused on the traditional Kari irrigation system, had an important environmental aspect and emphasized the importance of traditional knowledge. IDRF programs have continued to focus on water and agriculture. The Koran says that God will never change the physical condition of people, if they do not change themselves. Education is key for both the recipients of assistance, and the donors.

Doug urged participants to consider development challenges from a holistic perspective since the economy, the environment, and society are all interrelated. He suggested that we need to facilitate the capacity of communities to explore what their worldview says about how to engage in stewardship. He outlined four approaches to our response to creation: human-centric: the world for human use and enjoyment. Eco-centric: humans are level with all other species. Theo-centric: the entire world derives its value from God. And, stewardship: we must tend and care for creation, not to be the masters of it.

Heather began by stating that we are living in the face of an ecological crisis and we need to awaken the world’s religions to respond. We are seeing paradigm shifts: the ecological crisis is causing us to question what we could possibly mean by development. Climate change tops the list – which also includes water, land, gender, refugees, governance, scarcity – of issues that are causing havoc on development agendas. We need to recognize that there is no human health without ecological health. Nor is there human security without ecological security.

Peter reflected on the Buddhist tradition and development. Buddhism, like other faith traditions, encourages people to consider their “fundamental questions,” such as, “why are we involved in international development?” Part of the Buddhist tradition is to slow right down, to pay close attention to very simple things; Peter suggested that we use ourselves as antennae for concerns in the environment. The seas, harvest, sky, and species, are all under threat. We need to think about these 100-200 year issues that were all a part of. Our responses will come out of deep interior, personal, painful experiences.

The discussion questions presumed that the environment was a part of the programming of the organizations around the table, but this is not necessarily the case. Participants discussed the importance of building alliances and reawakening our call to be stewards of the environment. It was suggested that at the core of linking faith, poverty, and the environment is advocacy, joint resistance, and policy change.

**Peacebuilding Panel.** Maliha Chishti, doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto focused on peacebuilding and reconstruction in Afghanistan; Stuart Schoenfeld, Chair of the Department of Sociology at Glendon College, York University; and Timothy Seidel, Director for Peace and Justice Ministries for MCC U.S. laid the groundwork for the discussion of peacebuilding, religion, and development.
Maliha discussed the importance of context and local knowledge. When we talk about religion and peacebuilding, particularly in the context of conflict in Muslim society, it must not be isolated from the larger context. Peacebuilding is very rarely connected from local to national to international contexts, but this is where there is potential for building solidarity and creating a dynamic of peace. The type of virulent and destructive fundamentalism that we see in Muslim countries has very little to do with Muslim history. The process of creating peace must be situated in local knowledge and understanding in order to advance.

Stuart provided a powerful example of a successful peace initiative. The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies seeks to create the next generation of environmentalists in the Middle East. The Institute offers a residential “year abroad” university program. A key element of the Institute’s success is the Peace Seminar, a mandatory, non-credit course that provided students with material to understand one another and allowed them to deal with their emotions. The course was facilitated externally by the Peace Research Institute on the Middle East (PRIME) and provided a dual narrative of the history of the region.

Timothy spoke about his experience working with MCC in the Middle East. He outlined the diaconal work on the “inter-faith bridge building initiative” that uses bridge building as a witness. The language of healing, truth, and reconciliation is being used even within secular organizations. Peacebuilders face the challenge of responding to cultural and religious dynamics of conflict; our analysis of conflict and identity requires sophistication. This is not a religious conflict. We are seeing faith-inspired hope: Palestinians, Christians, and Muslims are working together, demonstrating patience to face oppression.

**Conference Summary.** Ray Vander Zaag provided some closing thoughts. He noted that while we seem to have the main ideas, we have not talked about how we are doing that work any differently from one another. We are committed to a faith-based approach because we think that it is truer. We have a knowledge about the world that secular agencies do not. There is room for deeper dialogue. We should not be afraid to say that we are witnessing to our faith, nor should we be afraid to hear from others that they are witnessing to their faith.

**Concluding Remarks.** Beverley Carrick and Penny Fancy closed the conference. They thanked everyone for their participation and reiterated that partnerships, friendships, relationships are all built on honesty and integrity. Our faith is what we have in common; we are all doing our best to make a difference.