

# The Coalition Meeting

Azaria Ulmer reports

The third meeting of the Coalition for the Initiative for a UN Decade of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, Understanding and Cooperation for Peace took place at the beautiful Maryknoll, in Ossining, New York, from March 7 through 9, 2011. At the opening circle there were about 24 people in attendance; however, more people showed up later in the day bringing the total to somewhere between 35 and 40 people. Dr John Taylor, who was also representing the International Association of Religious Freedom, chaired the meeting.

The meeting began with a moment of silence and reflection, followed by opening words of appreciation by Dr. Taylor; then the opportunity was given to each one of us to say briefly who we were and what organization we were representing. Here is a sample of a few of the organizations present: Bahai International Community, Brahma Kumaris, Federation of Islamic Association of Senegal, Global Family for Love and Peace, Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, The World Young Women Christian Association, and The World Council of Churches.

It was explained that the meeting would be structured along two main tracks:

Track 1, focusing on the Goal of a UN Decade proclaimed by the General Assembly

Track 2, based on Partnering with the UN towards shared goals.

We then broke for lunch. At lunch I was approach by a lovely woman who said that she was very moved by what I had said about Subud. We sat together for lunch and had a wonderful conversation about Subud and my experience in Subud. She has been a Baptist Minister for over 20 years, is a member of the Knights Templar and a professor. She told me that she felt there was something that was missing for her, and that the way I spoke about Subud moved something within her. We talked many times throughout the few days I was there: I gave her all the necessary information she would need to contact a helper here in New York, our website and I also gave her my contact information. She is traveling a bit right now but when she comes to New York we plan to meet up.

I very much enjoyed the break times. I made an intention to sit at a different table each time to have an opportunity to meet with as many people as possible. At every table I sat, I was treated kindly and was welcomed. Most people did not know about Subud and seem genuinely interested in wanting me to share with them who we are. This gave me great pleasure, getting to share over and over about Subud.

The format of the meeting was set up with presentations, a panel discussion, a questions and answers forum, and later, after dinner, those who still had the energy broke out into working groups to work on amendments to the vision statement. I was not one of those people.

The First Secretary of the Ministry of Jordan, Mr. Al Nsour, gave the first presentation, sharing the behind the scenes experiences that achieved the resolution for an Inter-faith Harmony Week (IFHW). Following 9/11 in 2001, there have been many misconceptions about Islam, and the leaders of Jordan felt that something should be done; a special advisory board was created to look into the matter. In 2007, the board found an Islamic team that would connect with other monotheistic religions, particularly Christianity, on the common theme, *loving God and loving our neighbor*. During the 64th session of General Assembly in 2010, there was an announcement about the *Inter-faith Harmony Week – love God and love your neighbor*. The Resolution was difficult to draft, using language which is not usual for the UN; however, it was important to reach consensus and the writing started in

September. Initially the response, particularly from the European Union, was very negative, based on the premise that religious agendas are not appropriate at the general assembly: The USA does not like to see religious language at the general assembly due to the separation of religion and state; some Muslim countries felt that loving their neighbor meant loving Israel; India and China also felt that it was inappropriate as they are so diverse. The language was changed to be more inclusive – to convince the US, Muslim, Chinese and Indian delegations, and finally the EU, who were the last to come on board, particularly the Netherlands and Belgium. These two countries felt that the language breached freedom of speech and freedom of religion, and they wanted a vote about this but were persuaded not to push the issue by other European Union countries. In the end there was success, and the world IFHW resolution was passed: The first one took place during the 1st week of February 2011. Mr. Al Nsour spoke on behalf of his Mission, which supports and endorses the Initiative for the UN Decade.

The next presenter was Dr Uthup from the UN Alliance of Civilizations (AoC). The AoC is an initiative of the UN Secretary General, launched by Spain and Turkey: It is not a UN Agency. The key working method is to work with partners, creating a platform for different networks and initiatives and to raise them to global attention. The AoC's goal is to be an agency that brings a wide range of groups together, particularly young people. Education, migration, youth and media are the four areas of focus for the AoC. Dr Uthup stated that, “a fundamental role in building peace is to understand the role that religion plays in conflict situations whether this is real or imaginary.” In 2009, from a list of conflicts, 108 out of 143 had some cultural or religious dimension: Clearly religion plays a role in conflict, so the AoC has been looking at how religions can be brought together to build peace and has been working with Religions for Peace to bring religious leaders together. Dr Uthup mentioned three principle actions where religious leaders are involved.

1. Rapid response media mechanism: Experts who can speak to the media on what is happening in crises around the world, with religious leaders who are part of this group and can write articles to be placed in different newspapers around the world.
2. Training for journalists.
3. Education, that incorporates teaching about religions. (There is a database with information on teaching about religions and a syllabus that can be used. Though looking initially into formal education, there is now a thought to look at non-formal education as well. Georgetown University has been doing work in this area and has done a mapping exercise.)

Marc-André Dorel from the UN Department of Economic and Social (ECOSOC) Affairs spoke on some of the difficulties faced by the Initiative. He questions whether political support for the Decade is possible: Following the agreement for the IFHW, some may consider that this resolution has broken new ground, and can lead to more considerations, a positive trend; but, some member states will see no need for a Decade now that the IFHW has been agreed upon and is not time limited. Both arguments are likely to be expressed by governments. Mr. Dorel states, that a number of the elements that need to be taken into account are:

- There is a need to shift to more operational activities, to go beyond the Decade and to identify the Coalition by its activities, especially those in co-operation with UN Agencies. The position of some of the European Union countries and the USA is expected to continue. Mr Dorel spoke frankly by saying, “when there is a government proposing a project, as Jordan did for the IFHW, it is a strong argument which gets attention. NGOs do not have the same

voice, so more concrete involvement of the UN, with UNESCO, AoC, and other development agencies with UN Agencies as concrete partners, can only strengthen the Initiative.”

- There are also budgetary implications and it is difficult to dismiss these concerns; but it is important to make it explicit that a big budget from the UN is not required.
- All kinds of views from around the world were gathered: In addition to the fears of religious groups, there are the fears diplomats/governments have in relation to NGOs, their motivations for action or who is influencing them.

At the end of the first day and well into the second day of the meeting, the feeling that came about from the presenters and much of the discussion was that it might be wise for the Coalition to make its Initiative wider, including the three pillars of peace, development and human rights. The decision was made that there should be some changes made to the vision, mission and expected outcomes statements, that would reflect the more broader view and include the Rio + 20 conference. A very heated, passionate conversation about the correct wording and the length of the vision statement took place: Most members believed the vision statement should be shorter, direct and more to the point; however, the executive secretary of the Coalition, Gerardo Gonzalez, felt that it should remain the same. At that time, I became very aware of the importance of Subud being part of this Coalition: I became very quiet and could feel a presence in the room, and I was moved to be in a Latihan space for the rest of the meeting.

At the closing circle there was a connective feeling between all of us: I felt touched and moved to have been part of this experience. There was a unity that gives power to the knowing that people of different religions and spiritual practices can come together and make a difference in the world. There was a knowing for me that each religion at its essence speaks to the same thing – the need to connect to the Great Life, compassion, care and love for your fellow human beings. We ended with each one reciting one of the golden rules. The one that stayed with me came from Judaism – *What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary.*



Participants at the Coalition meeting. Azaria third from the right back row

