



THE PEACEBUILDERS

“Keeping the ICF Circle informed; Connecting with Community of Interreligious Peacebuilders”

Bi-monthly E-Newsletter of the Interfaith Cooperation Forum of Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs



15 youths attended ICF Peace Institutes – Training of Trainers 3 and 4 in Chiangmai

From October 26 to November 21, 2022, the Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) successfully held a series of training trainers on conflict transformation, peacebuilding, and peace education at the YMCA International Hotel in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The training welcomed fifteen (15) participants nominated by members/partner organizations from different countries, namely, Myanmar (2), India (2), Vietnam (1), Laos (1), Bangladesh (1), Sri Lanka (1), Philippines (2), Indonesia (1), Timor Leste (1), Cambodia (1), Nepal (1) and Mongolia (1).

The 26-day training had 2 modules. The first was on conflict transformation and peacebuilding, and the second module was on peace education. Two experienced Nepalese trainers, Dr. Susan Risal and Hari B. Dhami led the sessions of the first module. In this training, the participants studied the definition of conflict, conflict analysis tools, and conflict transformation methods. The course content developed in a non-linear, practical, and learner-centered way blew their mind and brought them many unforgettable experiences. Most of the participants shared that the role-playing activity is one of the most interesting and memorable moments during sessions on the first module. In these sessions, they have experienced numerous characters in case studies that they can easily observe from their daily life and apply knowledge to handle these situations with effective solutions. After that, they could fully assimilate new information and open in-depth discussions relating to conflict and peace topics in their countries. Also, they had a valuable chance to facilitate a two-day workshop on conflict transformation for high school students from Chiang Mai International School. This was the first time for most of the participants had drawn ideas and prepared learning materials.

Inside this Issue:

15 youths attended ICF Peace Institutes – Training of Trainers 3 and 4 in Chiangmai	1
Nepal Unites organized a two-day workshop on Human Rights and Nonviolent Communication (NVC)	3
ICF Staff Conducted Ocular Visit to Nepal for the School of Peace	5
ICF Alumni of Indonesia held a two-day workshop in Bali	6
The Peace Institute-Training of Trainers: Tami's Reflection	7
"Continually work to achieve peace in our daily lives": A Reflections on the Peace Institute	9
A Reflection	11
TO GO FAR IS TO GO TOGETHER	12
From the Editor's Desk: Christmas Musings - On Heaven, Religion, and Peace	13



These were done so that students who are not used to discussing the topic of conflict could explain and implement conflict transformation methods in actual situations.



The ToT participants with the guests from a local High School during the practicum .

The second module of peace education was conducted by Ma'am Jo Villanueva from the Philippines. The module has given the participants an in-depth understanding of peace education and of peaceable teaching-learning processes and strategies that a peace educator should learn. After the training, participants became aware of the role as well as key characteristics of a peace educator. Sreymenh, a Cambodian participant shared that with the knowledge and skills gained from the training, she felt more confident and willing to conduct a training workshop on conflict transformation and peacebuilding in their communities.



Participants during an activity.

Jessi, a participant from Vietnam, shared her impressions on the module: "The participants were full of energy and excitement to approach such a huge topic "Peace" with an alternative way. Ma'am Jo highly integrated diverse learning activities into each session. Not only have we learned about issues relating to peace but also essential and practical skills a peace educator must have." The module came to an end with a one-day practicum on peacebuilding.



The group during their outing to the Maerim Elephant Sanctuary.

In contrast to their desire, the participants had to conduct the workshop without any guests due to an unexpected situation. However, they conducted the practicum successfully and gained more experience in handling facilitation issues.

In addition to indoor learning, the participants spent their days off visiting famous tourist attractions in Chiang Mai and participating in extra-curricular activities with Thai locals. During the 26-day training, the participants lived in a truly peaceful environment where people were encouraged to raise their voices, listen to each other, and respect differences and personal privacy.

Giang Thu Đoàn (Jessi)
Vietnam



Nepal Unites organized a two-day workshop on Human Rights and Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

The Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) funded Nepal Unites to hold a two-day workshop on Human Rights and Nonviolent Communication (NVC) in Old Baneshwor, Kathmandu, Nepal on November 29-30, 2022. Nepal Unites is one of the chapters of Global Unites, a youth organization with chapters in 13 countries. The workshop facilitators are Mohammad Ayatulla Rahaman on Human Rights, Mohammad Jiyaul Rahaman, and Rajan Bhandari on Nonviolent Communications. They are currently the active leaders of Nepal Unites, and all of them are also ICF alumni. ICF is a project of the Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs (APAY).

The opening session was led by Jeevan Bhandari who invited everyone to participate. The Nepali National Anthem was played following the introduction. Included in the opening ritual was the water poured on the flowerpot by the ICF staff Dr. Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, Ms. Baidido Manalasal Saganding, and Ms. Annika Denkmann to symbolize the commitment to protect the earth and the environment. The president of Nepal Unites, Mohammad Jiyaul Rahaman, gave a warm welcome to the participants and expressed gratitude for their participation in the movement. Mohammad Ayatulla Rahaman, the national director of Nepal Unites, spoke about the Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) working efforts in the Asian regions and then he gave a brief introduction to Nepal Unites movement. Rajan Bhandari, the program coordinator of Nepal Unites, created a positive atmosphere by asking the participants to put down their expectations before asking them to form three groups. He gave each group essential tasks to do during the workshop.

Mohammad Ayatulla Rahaman facilitated the first session on the topic of Human Rights. by. He began by requesting the participants to write their thoughts on Human Rights. He showed the video on the 30 articles of UDHR to enhance the participants' understanding of the topic. Among the important points that were discussed were the definitions of HR, core values, characteristics, generation of HR, and the three dimensions of HR. The facilitator asked three participants—one representing the PWD group, one from the LGBTQIA+ community, and one from the Musahar Community in Nepal—to share their personal experiences in the struggle for their rights.



Sharing their own personal experiences in the fight for their rights.

The facilitator then asked the participants to form into four groups and asked each group to identify one human right concern specific to Nepal. The following topics emerged for discussion: Prevalence of Discrimination, Child Rights and Education, Death in Custody, Geographical Discrimination, and Collective Rights. The participants discussed how to resolve these problems through individual initiatives, social campaigns, public awareness campaigns, and the implementation of government policies in Nepal.



Participants during group sharing.

These short statements were posted on Nepal Unites' official social media account. Some of their statements are the following:

"Minorities and Indigenous communities deserve an equitable and just society free of discrimination." - Sandeep Sada

"As I will be a future Engineer; I will not appoint any child as a labor to protect the child's right." - Mahtab Alam Khan

"The unnoticed voice of one human is the ignorance of multitude alike." - Sunrose Maskey

"Humanity proves your identity as a human, not your biological appearance." - Sujina Dhoju

On the second day's session, the topic was Nonviolent Communication. Mohammad Jiyaul Rahaman started the session by introducing Nonviolent Communication (NVC) and its history and purpose. He also showed a short video on NVC. The co-facilitator, Rajan Bhandari, shared the basic principle of NVC. Both facilitators introduced the four key elements of NVC.

The two-day workshop had succeeded meaningfully. Everyone was engaged in meaningful and active participation. One participant, Yamu B.C., commented that this type of workshop is needed everywhere, especially in the school and community.

The workshop participants' feedback was greatly acknowledged and highly valued. After learning about Human Rights and Nonviolent Communication, a participant, Dipendra Basnet, appreciated Nepal Unites for providing this platform to learn more on these topics, saying that NVC is a totally new topic and body of knowledge.



Rajan facilitating during the NVC workshop.

The workshop was attended by 7 females and 7 males (1 PWD), and 2 participants from LGBTQIA+ groups who were selected from online applications. The participants had been selected based on their responses to the application's questions as well as their gender balance. Anubhuti Bhattarai, the communication coordinator of Nepal Unites, led the closing session. She thanked everyone for their meaningful and active involvement and expressed her hope to the participants that they would use what they had learned. The Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) Team presented the participants with certificates of participation at the conclusion of the two-day workshop.



Group picture with certificates.

Mohammad Ayatulla Rahaman
School of Peace 2017
National Director, Nepal Unites



ICF Staff Conducted Ocular Visit to Nepal for the School of Peace

From November 28 to December 3, 2023, ICF staff visited Nepal to attend a two-day workshop on Human Rights and NVC conducted by the Nepal ICF Alumni. Furthermore, the visit also provided an opportunity for ICF to firm up plans and look at potential venues for the School of Peace from February to mid-March, 2023. ICF Alumnus Mohammad scouted for possible venues beforehand, which led the staff to stay in the mountains at Ratnagiri Resort outside of Kathmandu. After careful consideration, ICF decided to hold the second part of the SoP at the Resort. The first part will be held at Bhaktapur Guest House, a little less remote, than the second venue. This will give the participants the chance to experience two different environments in addition to the planned community immersion during their 50-day stay in Nepal. The visit did not only serve to see and decide on the venues it was meant to finalize the plans for the SoP.

Therefore the ICF staff had a long meeting together with ICF Alumnus Mohammad, who has served as the main point of contact in planning the SoP in Nepal. The meeting's agenda included forging the decision on the venue, and the budget, and finalizing the program that includes the decision on whom to invite as resource persons for the different topics. After the long but fruitful meeting, the parties arrived at an agreement on most decisions and the division of tasks. The ICF staff is looking forward to returning to Nepal in 2023 to conduct the School of Peace and would also like to take this opportunity to thank ICF Alumnus and Director of Nepal Unites Mohammad for all his effort in assisting ICF to plan for the SoP 2023 in Nepal.



ICF staff Bai and Muriel meeting together with Mohammad with the potential resource person for the SoP.

*Annika Denkmann,
BftW Seconded Personnel*



ICF Staff Annika being welcomed by Alumni Mohammad and Jiya in Nepal.



ICF Alumni of Indonesia held a two-day workshop in Bali

On December 7-8, 2022, the ICF Alumni of Indonesia met for an updating and planning workshop at Maha Bhoga Marga Guest House in Badung, Bali. Ten (10) participants attended, of whom 9 were females, and one was male. This number included the ICF staff and the General Secretary of Indonesia YMCA, who organized the workshop.

The first day of the workshop started with an opening prayer led by Rev. Kristi. An introduction activity called "creating a business card" followed, with Rahma Melia Maharani and Mariana Heatubun facilitating. The exercise allowed the participants to share their names, the ICF activity attended, and how the ICF activity impacted their lives. The participants shared that the ICF activity they attended helped deepen their understanding of conflict, human rights, religion, and peace among others. After this activity, Baidido Saganding, ICF Program Officer, gave a brief introduction on ICF works and activities. The introduction of ICF helped the participants refresh on what ICF is and its works. It also helped clarify that ICF is a project of the Asia Pacific Alliance of YMCAs, and not an independent organization.

In the afternoon, Ms. Margaretha Andoea, the YMCA of Indonesia's General Secretary, facilitated the workshop on the local and national situation of Indonesia. The participants formed groups according to their place of origin and discussed the current situations of their localities. Some of the issues that came out were poverty, violence, and access to education and mining. They also identified the steps to the possible solution of the identified problems in their communities. Following this activity, a dialogue with the Bali Christian youth took place. The youth shared their church activities and how they relate to other young people of other faiths. After the day's activity, the participants went to Uluwatu to witness the Kecak dance, a Hindu traditional dance based on the story of Ramayana.



Dialog with the Head of Gedong Gandhi Ashram.



Puansari facilitating the reflection session



Retno Ngapon facilitating the planning

On the second day of the workshop, the participants visited Gedong Gandhi Ashram in Karangasem, Bali. The participants engaged in discussion with Pak Sadra, the head of the Ashram. He shared the program of the Ashram such as protecting the environment, health, interfaith, and peace-related activities. He also shared the history and vision of the Ashram. The visit provided insightful reflections among the participants. In the evening, participants wrote and shared their reflections about the dialogue with the Bali Christian Youth and the visit to Ashram. After the sharing, Dr. Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro led the Biblico-Theological Reflection on YMCA Vision 2030, Climate Change and the Misunderstanding of "Stewardship of Creation."



She challenged the participants to discover what their religion's sacred texts say about caring for the Earth. To conclude the two-day alumni gathering, Rev. Retno Ngapon facilitated the planning of the next step that the Indonesia alumni would take. The ICF alumni hope to connect with other ICF alumni of Indonesia and look forward to their next meetings – online and in-person.

The activity was successful and ICF is thankful for the active participation of the ICF alumni of Indonesia.

*Baidido Saganding,
ICF Program Officer*

Alumni Reflections Section

The Peace Institute-Training of Trainers: Tami's Reflection

Our organization, Sabokahan Unity of Lumad Women was privileged enough to be offered an opportunity to attend a Training of Trainers in Chiang Mai from October 21 to November 26, 2022. This invitation and space were timely and relevant to our work, especially for indigenous women and LGBTQI+-led organizations like ours. The training was an opportunity to make better and improve our education and training program for our members, allies, and communities given the arduous and challenging political climate in the Philippines.

Ironically, I did not have peace of mind when I attended the training. I have been going through so much pain and grief over the past 5-6 years. Perhaps this year is the most difficult one. I was not able to attend the funeral of my beloved grandma who raised me. I have not seen her for 6 years since I could not go home because of my security issues. I have lost so many dear colleagues with whom I shared joys, laughter, and tears in the course of my work as a peace, indigenous, and human rights activist. Two of them were decapitated by the paramilitary groups. Another one whom I treated like my sister was shot in the leg and died 3 days later.

The other three were widely published in the news – Elegyn Balonga, Chad Booc, and Jurain Nguho – were also brutally murdered by the military while doing on-site inspections of the remaining Lumad indigenous schools that were forcibly closed by the government under false allegations of being a training ground for terrorists. They were ardent supporters of us, Lumad, and the rural communities. I could go on and on with the list of fellow advocates whom I deeply respected and cared for, but faced untimely deaths for their noble yet perilous work for the marginalized communities under the Duterte and Marcos regime.

I was also recently arrested, detained for a few days, and slapped with trumped-up charges while doing an immersion with a farmer's organization. This organization has been actively campaigning for the farmers to reclaim their land from a rich local landlord. The mental, physical and emotional stress has taken a toll on me. But I could not stop working. I could not shut off my brain. My political work has been my outlet to express all my rage, sadness, and grief for the injustices that have been done to our people. I was exhausted but I did not know how to rest. I needed help but I did not want to bother anyone with my issues. I have been supportive of others but not of myself.





With all the sadness and trauma that have experienced, I have been longing for a deep sense of community, love, and comfort. I wanted to have a simple conversation with the mothers, fathers, children, and youth. I want a hug, a pat on my shoulder, and to be told that everything is going to be okay. And that doing my best is more than enough. I want to be with the masses.

During the training, I met even younger peace advocates. I got to build with them on a personal level. From there I learned about how structural and cultural violence directly affected them, their families, and their communities. It was shocking and enraging to hear of how women and LGBTQI+ in Southeast Asia are severely restricted or confined by unjust and oppressive feudal traditions and customs. The most shocking to me, was perhaps, the caste system. A fellow participant in India told me that intermarriages between different castes and religions are extremely prohibited. If they happen to convince their families to marry, there is a possibility that one party - either the husband or the wife - will be murdered within a year. Shockingly, it seems that the caste system is even practiced among Christians and indigenous communities. even though this has nothing to do with their religion or culture. It is crazy how their communities are so divided due to the existence of an obsolete and divisive mechanism that was imposed both by religion and tradition. The structural and cultural violence is so deeply ingrained that women's subjugation is so normalized and continuously upheld or institutionalized by the ruling state. It makes me wonder: how can a simple right to love be so complicated and oppressive? Isn't it a human right to love and be loved? Why do women have to suffer so immensely when their lives are largely dictated and predetermined following the caste system?

If the situation is already unimaginable for women, how much more for the LGBTQI+ community in India? This goes to show that our work as peace advocates still has a long way to go in addressing the root causes of violence.

In the Philippines, feudalism, patriarchy, and homophobia are also prevalent. However, there has been progress over the past few years due to the presence of strong social movements. I was shocked that I was the only participant in the training who identified as LGBTQI+. It was a common sight to see that whenever I attended an event or activity in the Philippines, I would often be in a big circle with fellow feminists and LGBTQI+ advocates. One participant in the ICF training even told me that I was the first gay person that she met in person. It truly gave me the feeling of immersing myself in their communities.

I appreciate how we opened up to each other and reflected on the things that we would learn at the end of each session. Perhaps the most humbling and impactful experience for me was facilitating and to practice-teach with Thai high school students. It was challenging because we had to figure out ways to simplify the concepts and come up with examples that were relatable to their lives. It also enabled me to look into the socio-economic, political, and cultural context of Thailand that affects the youth. The input of my group mates who are immersed in the culture of Thailand helped me grasp the essence of social realities in the country. Also, the staff and training instructors were always there for us to guide us whenever we are confused or needed some affirmations. Overall, it was the collective effort that made it a huge success.

Attending the training and being in an inclusive learning environment with fellow advocates was truly enriching. The training gave me the space to breathe, laugh, grieve, connect, and give and take. It made me feel a deep sense of community.





It allowed me to experience human connection and relationships with fellow advocates across Asia who are treading the same path of building genuine peace in our respective communities.



Participants sharing during the ToT.

I am grateful for the opportunity to share the stories of our chairperson Bai Bibyaon Ligkayan Bigkay. She was the first female Manobo tribal chieftain of the Lumad tribes, and about the overall Lumad indigenous women and LGBTQI+ experience of peace work through our workshops and group sharing. I am also grateful for the warmth, kindness, and trust of the participants who shared a part of their lives with me. I am certain that this training inspired each one of us that peace is possible in our lifetime, may it be big or small. Somehow, this will give us more courage to stand up for our rights as well as for others. If we don't act, who will? If not now, when? This is a challenge to myself and everyone. Lastly, I would like to commend the brilliant minds and hearts behind the training curriculum: the well-experienced trainers and staff for their love, commitment, and support throughout this training. On behalf of Sabokahan, we thank you again for this opportunity.

*Tami,
Philippines*

"Continually work to achieve peace in our daily lives": A Reflections on the Peace Institute

The Peace Institute III, a ten-day Training of Trainers (ToT) on Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding was held at the YMCA International Hotel in Chiang Mai, Thailand last October 27-November 6, 2022. It was the first time I participated in a training conducted by the ICF and I can say that it was such a wonderful and life-changing experience. We, the participants, came from 12 different Asian countries as well as religious backgrounds. We all were new to each other but through the engaging and interactive activities that our trainers Ms. Susan Risal and Hari Dhami introduced to us, we got more acquainted with each other in no time.

During the training, our trainers discussed to us the topics of conflict, violence, and peace. I understood that conflict can be a positive thing if we use it to improve our lives or situations. This concept is called conflict transformation. I also learned that violence is not just about the direct or physical one like physically hurting another individual, but it could also be structural and cultural, the unseen types of violence.

We also learned about conflict analysis tools which are very helpful for aiding us in finding out the root cause/s of a problem which could help us in attaining sustainable peace. These tools can be used in our daily lives.





In the training, a lot of group work allowed us, the participants, to think and reflect on the topics and share what we have learned with everyone. These also helped us get to know one another better. There was also a lot of sharing about our personal experiences in our respective countries/communities which has personally helped me to reflect more about the situations that have happened and currently happening in my country, which is the Philippines. Hearing about the situations in their respective communities from my co-participants and seeing their passion for spreading peace in their communities has motivated me even more in doing something that would help make the world a better place to live in.

On the last two days of the training, we had a practicum to facilitate a workshop and apply and teach what we have learned to 14 high school students from Chiangmai International School. A few days before the practicum, we were taught by Annika Denkmann, an ICF program officer, how to write modules for facilitating workshops. It was such a very informative lesson that I learned that I could also use it as a guide when I facilitate a workshop in my community later. For me, in making the module with our groupmates for our practicum, identifying the objectives is the most challenging part because it is in the objectives where the whole practicum would revolve. I am very happy that our practicum turned out well. It was not perfect, but we learned a lot from each other. We also received feedback from our trainers and co-participants which are in improving our facilitation skills. Although we were divided into three groups in facilitating the two-day practicum, the three groups were also one group. We helped each other and it just proves that good teamwork can help make any event successful. Overall, I enjoyed our training. There were a lot of invaluable knowledge, skills, and experiences I got that I would treasure forever.

I remember Ms. Muriel Orevilla Montenegro, the ICF Coordinator, said during the training, “Everything under the sun is a peace issue.” This means that everything we do, even the simple things are related to peace. Deciding what to pick between two different meals to eat for lunch or having a small misunderstanding with a colleague is a peace issue. Therefore, we must continually work to achieve peace in our daily lives.

Days and weeks after the ToT, I find myself becoming more aware of my surroundings relating them to peace. I have become more conscious of my thoughts, words, and actions and strive to achieve peace in every area of my life. I will be forever grateful for the opportunity in participating in ICF’s Peace Institute. I am also very blessed to have met wonderful people from the training. We may be from different countries and religious backgrounds, but we have surely become a family. It is so nice to belong to a community where everyone is very encouraging and helps each other in achieving the same goal. And that goal is peace.

*Kharinna De Leon,
Peace Institute-Training of Trainers
Chiangmai 2022*



Kharinna (right) with fellow participant Nora during an activity.



A Reflection

I am Sandeep Sada from Saptari, in Nepal. I participated in the two-day workshop on Human Rights and Nonviolent Communication with Nepal Unites and with support from Interfaith Cooperation Forum. The deliberations, collaboration, and discussions on Human Rights and Nonviolent Communication supplemented my knowledge of the said topics. As a rural development professional and social entrepreneur, I have extensive experiences experience in rural development, gender equality and social inclusion, youth, and adolescent development, equitable and sustainable development, and youth-related policies on civic participation and livelihood opportunities. But being there during the workshop was a wonderful opportunity for me to be part of the youth movement in Nepal. I have always wanted to work with young people and empower them to be agents of sustainable transformation. I have always wanted to stimulate, connect, empower, and prepare a new generation of national leaders by providing personal, organizational, and community transformation skills and apparatuses. I have always wanted to unite Nepalese youth from all ethnic and religious groups in a movement that brings hope and facilitates reconciliation in Nepal. This workshop served as a supportive pillar for the unfolding of my life in the days to come.

The first day was the session on human rights. I was happy I got an opportunity to share the socioeconomic dimensions of the Musahar community in the Saptari district. This was a precious moment for me as I was able to express my life encounters with discrimination based on caste, color, and language. These are indications of the violation of human rights of the minority and marginalized ethnic communities in the country. The second day had nonviolent communication as the focus. We got an insight into the approach and persistence of the communication methods and tools to practice in our daily lives and professional lifestyle. I was very privileged to be part of the workshop, and thanks to all of the organizing committee of Nepal Unites that invited me to be part of the grand event. We even produced distinct slogans for World Human Rights Day and pledged to facilitate empowerment with human rights provisions and legislation. My slogan for the day is “Minorities and Indigenous communities deserve equitable and just society free of discrimination.”. This was a delightful opportunity for me as a participant.

*Sandeep Sada,
Nepal Unites Alumni
Workshop Participant*



Sandeep (right) during a sharing session with a fellow participant.

©Nepal Unites



TO GO FAR IS TO GO TOGETHER

If you want to go fast, go alone
If you want to go far, go together
(African Proverb)

This saying seems to be relevant to Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) alumni in Indonesia. Since it was first held in 2006, ICF has generated hundreds of alumni scattered in various places in Indonesia and has become peacebuilders in their respective contexts. For this movement to go far and sustain itself, consolidation and collaboration of a more directed and structured movement are needed. Exactly as the saying goes at the beginning of this essay: "If you want to go far, go together."

Taking place at Maha Bhoga Marga on December 6-9, 2022, ICF cross-generation alumni gathered to consolidate. We started the meeting by sharing ICF's impact on each other. Everyone shared how ICF played a role in lighting up the spirit of building peace within us: through the theory and practice of peace being taught, interactions with local communities, and friendships with our peers. One alumni stated that this meeting was a kind of "mudik" for him. "Mudik" in Indonesian means going home: meeting your beloved family. It seems we all agree with the statement. We all go home to ICF: our beloved family, a place where passion for justice and peace is planted and blooms. This sharing reminds us that we are not alone in this journey. It is heart-warming how one can have friends, who share the same passion to build justice and peace.

We discussed some of the obstacles to achieving justice and peace in local and national contexts in Indonesia. Several challenges emerged, such as the potential of identity politics towards the 2024 General Election, poverty and violence, low levels of education, and unsustainable mining practices. This discussion session is an expression of our awareness that justice and peace are cross-sectoral issues, which need to be pursued with a multidisciplinary approach and involving many partners. Peace does not happen by itself. We must consciously and creatively strive for it, through our lives and activities.

Dr. Muriel Orevillo Montenegro, ICF Coordinator, Baidido Saganding, the Program Officer of ICF, and Margaretha Andoea, the Secretary General of YMCA Indonesia, who organized the program, helped bring meaning to the meeting. Not only do they accompany the alumni, but they also provide support and direction to the vision, mission, and focus of ICF. Their presence helps alumni to be more solid in realizing ICF's mission, particularly in Indonesia.

The real steps done were setting up a database of ICF Indonesia alumni, and to hold regular monthly meetings online. Hosting the meeting will be rotated. Even though it is simple, this step can build connections between alumni, the spirit for peace is rekindled, and collaboration is strengthened. We want to go far to sow the seeds of peace. Thus, we need to go together. May God bless these endeavors.

*Puansari Sinegar,
Indonesia*





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The Interfaith Cooperation Forum is a program of Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs. It values the significance of interreligious understanding and unity. Thus, it offers opportunities for study and appreciation of the different perspectives of religions on peace, and discern the role of religion in peacebuilding. Yet, considering that unpeace is brought about by many factors, including the onslaught of neoliberal economic globalization, more people experience poverty, internally displaced people are increasing as communities are destroyed, native wisdom and values are overrun by Western and consumerist outlooks, patriarchy and racism persists, and climate change is now felt as the destruction of the Planet Earth seems unabated.

Peace is celebrated as a gift from the Divine, yet, we, the earthlings have the responsibility to make peace a reality. Although its contribution may just be like a drop of water into the lake, ICF seeks to equip young people of different religious traditions, especially from the marginalized communities of Asia and Pacific, to make waves of peacebuilding actions.

From the Editor's Desk:

Christmas Musings — On Heaven, Religion, and Peace

For the Christian world, December is a time to celebrate Christmas – the birth of one who points to the people how to be better persons as believers of the Messiah. It is not about salvation that is influenced by the Hellenistic view of dualism: of saving the soul, rather than establishing social justice in a society that ushers peace. In the traditional Christian teachings brought by the colonizers, one attains salvation when the soul departs from the body. This is not the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Some 2000 years ago, Jesus taught that one experiences the reign of God, which is interchangeably viewed as the "kingdom of God" or "heaven," when there is good news to the poor, the captives, and those imprisoned on trumped-up charges. One experiences "heaven" when there is food security and when the literally and metaphorically blind can see, and when the oppressed are set free from the shackles of tyranny. (Luke 4:18-19).

The Christians are only a measly 4% of the total population of Asia. The Christians are mandated to be the "salt of the earth," that is to provide meaning to the people. Yet, one could not say that providing a meaningful existence on earth is the only task of the Christians. People of other faiths in Asia – Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Shinto, Sikhs, Taoists, and Indigenous Spiritualities such as Shamanism are all called to make Asia a better place to live in. The sacred texts of the living religions in Asia give lessons to the adherents to respect human life and all forms of life on earth. In short, all living religions in Asia teach about peace, prudence, integrity, and so on. It behooves all adherents of religions to embody these values and make peace a reality. Peace does not work in an environment of greed!

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Yet Asia is beleaguered with so many conflicts, and social, cultural, political, as well as economic upheavals due to corruption and lack of discernment. Where have religions gone wrong? Why are religions not able to mold adherents who take seriously the values they teach? Do people take religion simply as an aesthetic in their life? Do adherents of religions who hold positions in government and private company leadership take religions only as providers of a culture that can be commodified for tourism, and money, and provide a basis for their selfish interests to stay in power? Has religion become irrelevant?

First, I argue that young people must cultivate peaceable character and values. They are the future leaders and somehow, guidance must be provided to them. Second, I argue that religion still has a role as a compass that provides direction to people's lives. But it is faith in the Divine that makes people move toward the direction of establishing a peaceful world. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." During this Christmas season and in all seasons, let us hold on to a faith that makes the things not seen possible. Let us cultivate a faith that can move mountains and effect changes in a world that is replete with violence and suffering. Join ICF in forging its hope to create changes for a better and peaceful world. Then, people will be merry not just during the season of Christmas, but throughout the year.

