

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND PEACEBUILDING IN MINDANAO

Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy

"Interfaith Approaches to Peace and Development in Mindanao"

Roundtable Discussions

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Introduction

Mindanao – the second largest island group in the Philippines located in the southern area of the country. Its 23 provinces are now home to roughly a quarter of the country's population, which is 2000 numbered around 18.1 million.

The social landscape of Mindanao has long been defined by diversity. After centuries of western colonization, state attempts at integration, and continuing migration, the region is now shared by 3 major groups set apart from each other by their religious and cultural traditions: the Christians, the Muslims or the Moros, and the Lumads or the Indigenous Peoples.

Diversity – for the many communities that are characterized by it – can be both a blessing and a challenge. On the one hand, the positive interface between the cultural practices and faith traditions of the community's diverse inhabitants can enrich community life. But on the other hand, the seemingly irreconcilable religious ideologies of the different faiths can often make it difficult for their adherents to look beyond their differences and search for common grounds upon which a shared community life can be built.

Increasingly, in many parts of the world, differences in religion have been cited as a factor in conflicts between or within states. A similar observation has been made regarding the ongoing conflict in Mindanao.

This interweaving of religion and conflict has led to the emergence of interfaith programs in Mindanao alongside conventional efforts to resolve the conflict. Interfaith dialogue, in particular, has become a vital tool for peacemaking, advancing as it does mutual understanding between people of different faiths and facilitating collaborative action across religious lines.

Interfaith Initiatives in Mindanao

Mindanao has a rich history of interfaith dialogue. As early as the 1970s there was already a conscious effort particularly among local religious leaders to organized dialogues among the different faith communities as a means of advancing peace in the region. Their pioneering work inspired other like-minded individuals and institutions to organize parallel activities in their areas. These initiative, in turn, gave rise to other programs, encouraging an even wider segment of civil society to invest resources on programs that give space for peaceful interaction between Muslims and Christians in the region. Today, there are a number of interfaith dialogue programs in Mindanao, with each program building on the success of earlier efforts and at the same time serving as a model for future initiatives.

Local interfaith dialogues are organized in a wide range of manner and their formats can be as varied as the participants they target. Some programs gather the clergy in the region while other initiatives focus on certain sectors of Mindanao society – the women, local leaders, the youth. Still others involve entire communities, in particular those that have been greatly troubled by the war. But although each evolve under different circumstances, these programs share a common goal: to foster peace in the midst of religious diversity by nurturing mutual understanding and tolerance among people of different faiths in the region.

Dialogue among the Christian and Muslim clergy has been an enduring element of interfaith dialogue in Mindanao. Experiences in the field of many practitioners demonstrate that the involvement and support of religious actors is critical to the success of peacebuilding in the region. When they truly espouse the goals of dialogue, religious professionals – the priests, the imams, the pastors, among others – have the capacity to guide and motivate their members to move from fear and distrust towards greater understanding and mutual tolerance. And because they are trusted and respected in their communities, their involvement lends credibility to the process of interfaith dialogue and more importantly provides a positive example for the members of their communities, some of whom may not be as inclined to participate.

Often, these dialogues are venues for theological exchange among the clergy. All regions – Christianity and Islam included – advocate peace and yet religious language is often manipulated to rationalize episodes of violence and to portray the conflict in Mindanao as a clash between Islam and Christianity. In the face of misconceptions about the different faith traditions, these extreme views of the conflict can all too easily dominate more rational discourses of the problem. Dialogue then becomes an opportunity for sharing among the clergy, for mutual learning and understanding of the true nature of each other's religion. In the process of knowing, each side can overcome their misconceptions and discover that in spite the inherent differences in their practices, there is much in their respective religions that link them together.

In other instances, dialogues among the clergy are organized in direct response to certain issues and events – so-called “crisis points” that can easily be manipulated by certain groups to advance their own interests and have the potential to further polarize the Muslims and Christians in the region. The ongoing dialogue, for example, between Muslim and Christian religious leaders in the Movement for Peace and Development (LMCMPD) in light of a series of violent incidents that threatened to reignite religious animosities in these provinces. In these instances, dialogue provides a neutral forum for religious leaders to publicly affirm their solidarity, in certain cases to jointly condemn acts of violence, and to appeal to their respective congregations for restraint and greater understanding.

One of the highly visible examples of interfaith dialogue in the region is the Bishops-Ulama Conference of Mindanao (BUC) formerly, the Bishops-Ulama Forum. The BUC itself evolved from a 1996 meeting between Muslim clerics or Ulama and Catholic Bishops of Mindanao to discuss an issue of particular concern to both communities at that time – the creation of the Special Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD), a key element in the peace agreement between the government and the Moro National Liberation Front. Critical and opposing voices from the Christian communities, who feared the proposal prejudiced non-Muslims, threatened to undo the peace gains brought about by the conclusion of the negotiations between the warring parties.

From that initial dialogue emerged this unique partnership between the Christian and Muslim religious leaders in the region. The BUC is an interfaith forum that today brings together the Catholic as well as Protestant Bishops and the Ulama of Mindanao for regular interfaith dialogue meetings. At times, these dialogues have been occasions for discussions of the spiritual dimensions of the peace process. But by far the more constructive contributions of the Forum to peacemaking in the region have come during periods of open conflict and violence when the religious leaders collectively and openly advocated peace and at key moments during the negotiations between government and rebel groups when their intervention facilitated the return of both parties to the negotiation table.

The effectiveness of the BUC in large part from the nature of its membership. Because it is comprised largely of mind-to high-level religious leaders, the Forum has managed to put a high-profile face to interfaith dialogue in Mindanao. This high-level example of interfaith cooperation has sparked public interest in an support for the process of interfaith dialogue as an integral component of peacebuilding. Moreover, the joint activities of the bishops and ulama under the BUC catalyzed parallel efforts among the local clergy in various communities across Mindanao.

Most civil society groups, however, who are engaged in interfaith dialogue, focus their efforts on grassroots programs. Grassroots initiatives are particularly important because they involve the very segments of Mindanao society who have directly borne the costs of war. Centuries of conflict have exacted a heavy toll on Muslim-Christian relations in the region. To many in these communities, their perception of the “other” has been filtered through the sufferings and hardships they and others in their communities have experienced during the war. Historical stereotypes persist – that of the Moros as “uncivilized heathens” and the Christians as “land grabbers” – and there is very little opportunity – and incentive – in the midst of the traumas of war, to calmly reassess these images.

In Region 9 – which used to include the war-torn provinces of Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Basilan – the Ateneo de Zamboanga University started supporting interfaith dialogues at the community level as early as the 1980s. A major undertaking the Silsilah Muslim-Christian Dialogue Movement, started to defuse tensions which arose due to the conflict between the MNLF and national government. In 1984, an independent foundation was established which provided institutional support for the movement. The Silsilah Dialogue Institute facilitates the formation of skills for people of different religious persuasions through its various enrichment programs so that they can be effective instruments in promoting a Culture of Dialogue in the region.

Pakigdait, Inc., is another of the region’s more active organizations that run community-based interfaith dialogue programs. *Pakigdait* (mutual understanding) is a multireligious organization that brings together Muslim leaders and representatives from five different Christian denominations. It focuses its efforts on the different communities in Mindanao that have directly experienced the devastations of war, as for example, the municipality of Kauswagan in Lanao del Norte which was the site of former President Estrada’s “all-out war” in March 2000. *Pakigdait’s* work in these communities illustrates the value of creativity and sensitivity in evolving community-based programs. To succeed in effecting a lasting change in the attitudes and values of the people in the community, *Pakigdait* finds that the challenge to organizations is to ensure that the activities in the transformation towards peaceful co-existence is not divorced from the realities of daily community life. Thus, for *Pakigdait*, simple, everyday activities like playing can be transformed into lived experiences of dialogue which along with symbolic activities like joint visits to places of worship can reinforced the lessons learned from forums, culture of peace workshops, and peace advocacy trainings.

The relief and development work of some organizations in Mindanao also sometimes serve as a vehicle for interfaith dialogue. One of the more immediate responses of civil society to the conflict in Mindanao was to organize relief and rehabilitation efforts in severely affected areas. In these instances, interfaith dialogue can be a critical component because the task of rebuilding communities in a mixed society often requires interaction and cooperation across religious

divisions. Also, the sustainability of these rehabilitation efforts rest in part on the commitment of the members of the different faith communities to continue working together to rebuild their areas.

Tabang Mindanaw (Help Mindanao) is one of the more successful examples of humanitarian operations in Mindanao that effectively incorporates the principle of interfaith dialogue. *Tabang Mundanaw* is a multi-sectoral initiative of business, private foundations, church and the media in partnership with the government. The Integrated Return and Rehabilitation Program (IRRP) in the second phase of this initiative facilitated the safe return of evacuees to their villages and assisted them in rebuilding their lives and their communities. The focus of the IRRP is to empower the tri-people of Mindanao – the Christians, Muslims, and Lumads – who were victims of the war to rebuild and rediscover their communities as “sanctuaries for peace.”

“Sanctuaries for peace” or “spaces for peace” are essentially grassroots-based peacebuilding initiatives of communities who want to secure their areas from armed hostilities. By negotiating with both government forces and rebel groups to respect the boundaries of their areas, these communities are able to declare their zones as armed conflict-free zones. First seen in the late 1980s, more and more of the region’s conflict-prone communities are now taking this courageous step, most recently in the war-torn town of Pikit in the province of North Cotabato where the residents of seven villages jointly declared their areas as “spaces for peace” and “children’s zone of peace.”

“Spaces for peace” are unique demonstrations of interfaith dialogue at work. As in the “sanctuaries of peace” supported by *Tabang Mindanaw’s* IRRP, community issues are collectively discussed and decided on with the leaders. In like manner, development projects are carried out with the involvement of a wide segment of the population. In the process of working side by side to rebuild their areas, stronger ties are formed among the community’s inhabitants, despite their different regions. In this sense, “spaces for peace” offer us an inspiring pre view of community life where religious diversity is celebrated and people of different faiths co-exist in the true spirit of mutual respect.

The third phase of *Tabang Mindanaw*, the Peace and Development Program for Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi (BASULTA), is similarly anchored on the principles of cultural integrity and inter-religious dialogue. It follows an integrated framework of social and income-generating services in order to address the long-term peace and development needs of the impoverished communities in these three provinces. Programs such as the BASULTA project of *Tabang Mindanaw III* illustrate that interfaith dialogue need not always take the form of “discussions” or “conversations” between faith groups. Quite often, it is the principles of “dialogue of life and action” which underpins successful examples of interfaith collaboration on concrete projects holds more promise in building trust and reconciling relationships – for it is the process of working side by side towards a

common goal that each individual can more readily see the “other” as a companion and as a partner.

There are many shared concerns among the different communities in the region around which interfaith collaboration can be organized but chief among these is the high levels of poverty and the lack of livelihood opportunities in the region, particularly in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) where 4 of the country’s 10 poorest provinces are to be found. Thus, programs such as the BASULTA project that encourage joint action between Muslims and Christians in addressing their particular economic concerns may generate more interest and elicit stronger commitment from both communities and in the end prove to be more sustainable and effective interfaith initiatives.

The involvement of women in interfaith dialogue is an essential – though often overlooked – element of peacebuilding in the region. Women can be very powerful catalysts for peace and advocates for dialogue in their communities and yet there are very few opportunities through which women – particularly Muslim women – can develop their potentials and become more active participants in peacebuilding. One example of a program that involves women is the Muslim Women’s Peace Advocates movement, first convened in 2000 through a training-workshop involving Muslim and Christian women leaders from the various areas of conflict in Mindanao. By targeting women, this initiative draws on the unique strengths of a vast, largely untapped resource that is indispensable and incomparably influential in the day-to—day life in Mindanao.

Dialogue involving the youth in the region is another critical component of interfaith programs that require particular attention by practitioners. The youth do not only share in the problems in Mindanao but they also inherit the responsibility to sustain the peacebuilding effort in the region. Interfaith dialogue can help them overcome their own biases and prejudices at an early stage and instill in them a greater appreciation for the religious diversity that exists in the region.

In most cases, the education system provides the perfect venue through which these programs can be integrated. In Mindanao, several schools and institutions for higher learning have already successfully integrated interfaith dialogue and peace studies into their curriculum. For instance, the Notre Dame University (NDU) in Cotabato City has a core course in peace education for all its college undergraduates. NDU is in fact an institutional pioneer in peace studies in the country and is the designated key institution in a consortium of five Mindanao universities which includes the Mindanao State University in Marawi City and the Ateneo University in the cities of Zamboanga and Davao that offer a graduate degree program in peace and development education.

Over the years, universities in the region have become increasingly important allies in the interfaith dialogue movement not only in light of the innovations they have made in their academic programs but more so because a growing number

of these institutions have established centers for peace and interfaith dialogue within their systems. NDU, for instance, founded its Peace Education Center in 1988; it also established an Institute for Inter-Religious Relations in 1999. centers such as those established by NDU are important because they provide a legitimate and permanent venue for interfaith dialogue in the region. Also, these centers conduct joint training activities, thereby empowering an even wider circle of “enthusiasts” to become advocates of interfaith dialogue. More importantly, these centers help make success stories in the region more widely known through their various publications. Successful examples of interfaith dialogue programs – and there are many of these in Mindanao – can serve as models for other organizations and institutions in developing and improving their own initiatives but this is only possible if these stories are documented and shared.

Much of the pioneering work in local interfaith dialogue, however, stem from the actions of religious institutions and faith-based organizations, interfaith dialogue, regardless of the format it takes, retains a uniquely religious element and is thus an area where faith-based organizations can prove to be very effective. Not only do their faith convictions lead them to emphasize dialogue in their activities but also the religious nature of these organizations can often make it easier for them to reach out to religiously defined communities. Many of these groups are Christian organizations, such as Peace Advocates of Zamboanga (P.A.Z.), that in most cases are associated with or involve the local parishes. In fact, in recent years many of the diocese in the region with a thriving Muslim population have organized desks for inter-religious dialogue, as in the case of the Archdiocese of Davao which created the Archdiocesan Center for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Dialogue.

Despite the growing number of organizations engaged in this type of peacebuilding activity, the local interfaith dialogue movement still owes much to the dedicated individuals – the “enthusiasts” – who have made a lifelong commitment to fostering better relations among the Christians and Muslims in Mindanao. In the long history of peacemaking in the region, the extraordinary stories of these individuals stand out as the true symbol of the Mindanaoans yearning for peace.

The Way Forward: A New Direction for the Interfaith Dialogue Movement

Today, there is wider recognition of the significant contributions that interfaith dialogue programs make towards the larger task of peacebuilding in Mindanao. While it is true that a peaceful resolution to the conflict has yet to be reached by the warring parties, more than three decades of committed work at enhancing dialogue between the Muslim and Christian communities in Mindanao has succeeded at least in building bridges and advancing greater understanding among people of different faiths.

What lies ahead for the interfaith dialogue movement in the country? In deciding the way forward, we are guided by the experience of other countries with vibrant interfaith communities like the United Kingdom where the organization of national interfaith councils proved to be key to sustaining and mainstreaming the interfaith dialogue movement.

The Interfaith Council aims to contribute to the larger task of ensuring a cohesive religiously diverse society by promoting local interfaith and intercultural initiatives and by supporting the various groups, organizations and institutions that are engaged in these activities. It will do this by:

- Fostering interfaith cooperation
- Enhancing communication and facilitating the exchange of ideas and good practices between and among these groups
- Serving as a conduit for foreign assistance
- Helping to identify, when needed, the critical areas for interfaith work and priority concerns in the country
- Recognizing best practices and successful models of interfaith programs through an Annual Award
- Running an information service about existing groups and networks and ongoing interfaith and intercultural programs in the country.