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Religious leaders agree that they must become involved

The Ethnic Relations Commission (ERC), in collaboration with the UNDP Social Cohesion Programme, hosted its National Religious Conversation at the National Cultural Centre on August 9, 2006, with 160 religious leaders in attendance.

Presentations were made by representatives of the Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Bahai and Rastafarian communities.

Pandit Krishna Persaud set the stage with remarks on why the conversation.

Referring to the murder of five Kaieteur News pressmen the night before, Pandit Persaud observed that religious leaders have to be more courageous as they work towards unity, and that their duty is to be ambassadors of the Creator.

He had been in attendance at neighbourhood conversations around the country, when the people looked at their dream for Guyana.

The issues they raised at these conversations dealt with health, education, equal access to resources, and equal opportunities. The people also mandated the Church to become politically involved.

Pandit Persaud agreed with such involvement, saying that truth, mercy and justice demand that “we become involved”. “We must also unite for prosperity; this is about doing God’s will, so that our flock will benefit here and now,” he said.

In his remarks, ERC Chairman Bishop Juan Edghill said that the Church must become involved if it is to reach out and help the oppressed. “We cannot close our eyes to injustice and discrimination. And with all its difficulties and problems, this country needs change,” he said.

He too referred to the murder of the Kaieteur News staffers. “Our nation is bleeding; the calm we have worked so hard on over the past three months is being threatened.

He posited that some religious leaders are afraid to champion human rights and justice for fear of being “demonized”.

He spoke of the Good Samaritan in the Bible, saying that while the priest and the Pharisee were afraid to defile themselves by touching a dying man, what about the man himself, and his need. “And so while we are protecting our image, what about the people who are suffering. To serve God we must serve people”, Edghill said.

He expressed the view that all those who stigmatise the Church for championing the cause of the disadvantaged know the truth in their hearts.

Bishop Edghill criticized the Church for reacting to undesirable situations rather than being proactive and staving off many of the problems at the onset. “When we are asked by parents to bury their children who are shot and killed, why can’t we ask them to allow us to talk to them before they are shot,” he asked.

As for the major issues raised by hinterland residents during meetings with the ERC, Bishop Edghill said they want religious leaders to see that roads are properly built and there is no corruption in the process, and to tell people not to use their daughters as prostitutes when they come to work in the city.

The Chairman said this is no time for political posturing. “We are different in our theology, but we all want to make Guyana a better place.” He said.

Group deliberations came up with the following:

- A call for better moral conduct and enhancement of values.
- A need for genuine religious leadership.
- A condemning of immoral activities, no public vulgarity particularly on television and in newspapers advertisements.
- A need for moral and spiritual education in schools and among adults.
- A need to show love to all, regardless of their circumstances.
- A facilitating of inter-religious meetings and prayers, so we can learn more about each other.
- A call for moral emphasis to start in the home.
- A need to be proactive in community development.
- A realization that violence is not an acceptable way of resolving conflict.

In brief remarks, Mr. Roelf Meyer, United Nations Conflict Transformation Consultant, told participants that religious leaders in South Africa had played an important role in the process of dismantling the system of apartheid.

He said Archbishop Desmond Tutu and other religious leaders had managed to bring the people together to talk about peaceful reformation. “Don’t let the elections derail you in your efforts to bring peace to your country” Mr. Meyer advised the religious leaders.

Wednesday, August 16, 2006