Muslim-Christian Dialog in the Philippines:
Methods and Contexts

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Introduction

In every culture, there are underlying systems. The geography of the place with its mountains, seas and terrains (physical or material), the way the people live (economic, social, political), the way people feel and think (cultural, religious), the way people share and celebrate life (world-view, spirituality) are but some of these components. Although some may be tempted to see these as independent in a given culture, these systems are linked. In fact, they intersect one another in the given and concrete context of culture, thus, engaging in a dynamic fusion we call life.¹ Such is the reality of Dialog and the methods on the Muslim-Christian Dialog adopted in Mindanao, Philippines.

It is therefore important to see and to understand these methods in their proper contexts. Here, we would understand ‘context’ as the ‘individual and collective experience,’ as it includes the experiences of the personal life of a person or group. Context also represents a complex reality. It encompasses a combination of several realities such as social location, history, political forces, social changes, cultural shifts and religious systems.² And it is also in this framework of contexts that I will try to describe the methods on Muslim-Christian Dialog in Mindanao, Philippines 1960's to the 1990's.

Philippine Context

The Philippines as a Nation and a Political Community

The Philippines as a political community lacks the characteristics of a mature and strong state. Three centuries under Spanish colonial administration, a four-year colonial interruption under Japanese occupation and a half-century under American rule, its independence in 1945 was not a result of a blossoming national consciousness but more of its colonial masters. Hence, some describe the Philippines as a ‘weak’ or a premature state because her statehood had been predominantly based on anti-colonial sentiments. Lacking the relative autonomy as a state, the parochial interests of Filipino social classes, the powerful political families and clans, the influential landowners and the elite, and wealthy Filipino capitalists still dominate the affairs of the state.³

The quest for a Filipino national identity still preoccupies Filipinos.⁴ Some identify themselves more with their regions or ethnic origins than with the 'Filipino nation.' ⁵ In fact, the Philippine Government has been contested by resistance groups such as the local communists, indigenous groups and Muslim secessionist groups.⁶

Philippine Topography and Society

Ethnic Diversity is a fact among Filipinos. They are an ethnic mix of Austronesian or Malay, Chinese and indigenous groups with Muslim, Spanish and American influences. Of the three external influences, the mark left by the Americans is regarded as the most pervasive and visible. The most

influential group, however, is that of Chinese.

There are at least five major languages spoken in the country with more or less 80 distinct ethnic dialects. With eight major ethno-linguistic groups and other surviving ethnic or indigenous groups, each cultural community has its own traditions, social and religious practices. Generally marginalized, these indigenous ethnic communities have not yet been accurately reported partly due to their relative geographical isolation. They comprise at least 106 ethnic groups.

**Muslims in Mindanao**

Although diverse and plural, Filipinos have two major religions: Christianity comprising 90% of the population and Islam with 5-7%. Today, Muslims in the Philippines consist of 13 ethno-linguistic groups: JamaMapuns, Iranons Kaagans, Kalibugans, Maguindanaos, Maranaos, Palawanos, Molbogs, Samas, Sangils, Tausug, Yaken and Bangingis.

Some 94% of Muslims in the Philippines are found among the four major groups: Tao-sug, Maranao, Maguindanao, and the Sama groups. The majority of them are scattered throughout Mindanao and among smaller islands to the south and west of Mindanao, the Sulu archipelago, and the southern parts of Palawan.

Historically, the Lumads initially inhabited Mindanao. When missionaries brought Islam to the island in 1275, some Lumads converted to Islam and thrived on the island through trade. With Spanish colonization in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, Islam's expansion and development ground to a halt. Spain waged wars against the Muslims. Three centuries of Spanish colonization, however, was unable to subjugate the Muslims. It was only after Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States in 1896 that the Muslims were subdued. During this period migration to Mindanao, the land that Muslims claimed, was encouraged.

Despite the policy to assimilate the Muslims into the larger Philippine society during the Philippine Commonwealth in 1935, Christian settlement communities started to grow in Mindanao. Muslims were slowly becoming the minority in the land they considered their own. In 1976, the proportion of Muslim inhabitants to the total population fell from 98% to 40%, and to 20% today. Muslims now own less than 17% of property on the islands and mostly in the impoverished areas. In the latest estimates, 80% of Filipino Muslims are landless.

The secession movements of Muslims in Mindanao is a complex problem. This is further compounded by the disunity of the Muslims themselves. In fact, Muslims have three major resistance groups who call themselves the Philippine Mujahideen.

In the 1970s the first Muslim Revolutionary group MNLF (Moro National Liberation Front) waged a bloody armed struggle against the Philippine government. This conflict has claimed around 120,000 lives, both combatants and civilians, and the displacement of over a million people. Founded by an ethnic Tausug leader, Nur Misuari, the MNLF declared the establishment of the Bangsa Moro Republic in 1974 and was recognized by the Organization of Islamic Conference as the “sole and legitimate representative” of the Bangsa Moro people. The MNLF has since concluded peace talks with the Philippine government. In-fighting and disunity has also plagued the MNLF. At present, they have three factions: the Anti-Nur Misuari MNLF faction, the Pro-Nur Misuari MNLF faction and the MNLF Integrates. The Pro-Nur Misuari faction was alleged to have been responsible for a massacre in Sulu in 2002 that led to the arrest of Nur Misuari.

The second major group is the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which claims to be the vanguard of the Islamic movement in Mindanao. Hashim Salamat, supported by the ethnic Maguindanaos of Mindanao, founded the group in 1977 when he and his supporters split from the MNLF. Unfortunately, the MILF also has its own splinter groups, who have also engaged in various kidnapping and extortion activities. As of today, the Philippine government is still negotiating peace with the MILF.

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9 Available from the world wide web: http://www.hawaii.edu/cseas/pubs/philippines/philippines.html
10 Available from the world wide web: http://www.hawaii.edu/cseas/pubs/philippines/philippines.html/muslim
The third group is the extremist Abu Sayyaf, believed to have links with the Al-Qaida network of Osama Bin Laden. While the fundamentalist Abu Sayyaf aims to establish an Iranian-style Islamic state in the southern Philippines, like the MNLF, Abu Sayyaf is also factionalized. Khadafy Janjalani, brother of slain founder Abduragak Abubakar Janjalani, is heading a fundamentalist Islamic resistant movement in Basilan. The other faction operating in Jolo was headed by the late Galib Andang, or Commander Robot, as he was known. Due to the group’s criminal activities, such as kidnappings, extortion and murder, and its suspected Al-Qaida links, the Philippine government has been in hot pursuit of the Abu Sayyaf. And the surge of Islamic fundamentalism has also become a serious security concern.

Thus, we can say that the misunderstandings between Christians and Muslims did not happen overnight. Suspicion and fears between Christians and Muslims continue. Certain places and cultures in Mindanao have become antagonistic and hostile. Extremist and/or fundamentalist armed groups have indeed made the Muslim-Christian Dialog a lot more difficult. Guns proliferate in many of their areas and have created a culture of violence. Inaccurate and biased depictions of Islam and Muslims in the media have also not been helpful.

Therefore the situation in Mindanao is multifaceted and complex. While social scientists have identified poverty, political exclusion and inequality as three major sources of conflict, other relevant issues and concerns need to be seriously considered. The Mindanao situation is also founded in its CONTEXTS: the geography, history, culture, and religious persuasions of its people.

**Historical Contexts of Muslim-Christian Dialog in Mindanao: the 1970s to the 1990s**

**The Economic Situation of the 1970s**

Although the comprehensive resettlement program in Mindanao started in 1913, the continued influx of Christian settlers from Luzon and the Visayas brought radical changes to the lives of the Lumads and the Muslims in Mindanao. In particular, the passing of Philippine laws that opened new areas for Christian settlements in Mindanao and other laws that were not sensitive to the customs and traditions of the Lumads and the Muslims further led to poverty and marginalization of these people. For instance, while these people held on to their indigenous view on the land as communal property or as an ancestral domain, the government adapted the western concept and practice of private ownership and land titling. While economic gains were promoted by certain laws that encouraged foreign investments in Mindanao, the degradation of forest ecology led to the destruction of some of the Lumad and Muslim communities. The reduction in number of the Lumad and Muslim population in their homeland has had serious economic and political consequences.

**The Political Situation of the 1970s**

For years, Muslims and Christians have managed to live together in peace. The increasing domination of Christian politicians and settlers in the traditional landholdings of the Lumads and the Muslims, however, was perceived as a threat by the Muslims. The 1968 massacre of Muslim military trainees accused of mutiny, who were mostly from Sulu and commissioned to fight fellow Muslims in Sabah, further heightened the perceived threat. Responding to this threat, Datu Udtos Muntalan formed the Muslim Independence Movement in 1969 envisioning a state for Muslims. This was the beginning of the formation of armed groups like the Muslim ‘Barracudas’ from Lanao and the ‘Black Shirts’ from Cotobato. The Christians too had their own armed group - the ‘Ilagas.’ Slowly, Muslim and Christian families became victims of each other atrocities. Revenge for the deaths of family members grew into a cycle of prejudice.

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18 Ibid.

19 Fr. Eliseo Mercado, OMI. “The Southern Mindanao Context of the Catholic Church’s Peace Building Efforts.” Unpublished article. P. 1

20 Fr. Roberto Layson, OMI. “Historical Backdrop of Christian-Muslim Relations in the Philippines.” Unpublished article P. 9

21 Ibid.

22 Fr. Eliseo Mercado, OMI.
and violence.\footnote{Fr. Roberto Layson, OMI.}  

The 1971 elections proved disastrous for the Muslim elite. Christian politicians won for the first time in Mindanao and took control of government institutions. This heightened the perceived threat from Christians and roused Nur Misauri to organize the Moro National Liberation Front that sought an independent state for Muslims. As the situation in Cotobato and the nearby areas had become completely out of control, President Marcos proclaimed Martial Law in 1972. This simply aggravated the already volatile situation.\footnote{Ibid.}

\textit{Cultural - Religious Situation of the 1970s}

The economic, social and political factors of Muslim-Christian relations seem apparent in the discussion. Equally important, however, is the religious perspective of this relationship. In Mindanao and among the indigenous culture, ordinary people viewed their economic, political and cultural experiences through the context of their spirituality. As such, the ordinary people whether Muslim or Christian interpreted these seemingly ordinary activities through a religious perspective.\footnote{Mehol Sadain. “Twisting Islam”. Available from the World Wide Web: http://members.tripod.com/bugsnbytes/bb_essays_002_02_01.html} As this phenomenon took place in the encounter of these subcultures, religious biases became inevitable. The construction of good roads, educational scholarships and services would not only be viewed as political activities but would be interpreted with some religious bias. Indeed, in cases of conflict, people’s peaceful or violent responses would also be interpreted religiously.\footnote{Renato Oliveros. “Moro-Christian Coexistence and Conflict in the Philippines.” Available from the world wide web: http://macdonald.hartsem.edu/articles_oliveros.htm.}

\textit{The Context of the Catholic Church in Mindanao circa the 1970s}

It is in these economic, socio-cultural contexts that the Catholic Church in Mindanao initiated peace-building efforts. Both as individuals and collectively, they participated in the over-all peace building efforts. On the whole, these could be described as multi-level, i.e. in their personal lives, as groups or organizations, as institutions or within structures.\footnote{Fr. Eliseo Mercado, OMI.}

The Catholic Church in Mindanao operated from two paradigms. One was the institutional paradigm that operated from the standpoint of the \textit{traditional understanding of ‘charity’}. Reaching out to peoples of other faiths, the Catholic Church peace-building initiatives were undertaken in the context of pastoral ministry and in the form of social action. Church institutions, like the parishes, schools, and organizations, took the ministry not only to their respective communities but also to their neighbor, whether Lumads or Muslims. The second emerged from Vatican II’s paradigm expressed in \textit{Nostra Aetate} where other faith traditions were to be positively appreciated and held in high esteem for their rituals and beliefs. Forgetting the pains and bitterness of the past, this paradigm has challenged all people of good will to become partners in building a more humane world.\footnote{Ibid.}

These new experiences on the emerging paradigm paved the way for the Catholic Church in Mindanao to give a new meaning to their mission of ‘Love thy Neighbor’ particularly in the context of the Muslim-Christian conflicts. These eventually led the Catholic Church to become engaged in peace-building initiatives. Keeping in mind an attitude of intervention, prevention and conflict resolution, the Catholic Church in Mindanao, both individually and as an institution, started the ‘dialogue of life’ as part of this overall peace building effort.\footnote{Ibid.}

\textit{Initiatives on ‘Dialog of Life’}

\textit{Christians, Religious Congregations, the Local clergy}

Among the religious who genuinely shared their lives in dialogue were the Oblates of Mary Immaculate OMI in Jolo and Cotobato, Claretians in Basilan, Carmelites in Zamboanga and Marawi, the Franciscans in Kidapawan, Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions PIME in Zamboanga., Religious of the Virgin Mary RVM, the Jesuits and many others.\footnote{CBCP. \textit{The 2004-2005 Catholic Directory of the Philippines}. Quezon city: Claretian Publications Inc., 2004. See appendix for other} From the local clergy were: Bishop Francisco Claver, the
Prelature of Marawi and Davao City, Bishop George Dion, Bishop Antonio Nepomuceno OMI, the diocese of Pagadian, the local churches of Mindanao-Sulu, and Bishop Fernando Capalla and many others, too. Initially started as personal initiatives, activities on Muslim–Christian dialog were also taken as group and diocesan activities integrated as the Social Action Apostolate (Kapapagaria), or in the form of Conferences: forum for ideas and pastoral sharing of all catholic churches (Mindanao Sulu Pastoral Conference). Later, these became part of the activities of the Commission of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (Episcopal Commission for Interreligious Dialogue), too.

Protestant Christians were also among those who actively initiated and supported Muslim-Christian dialogue. Peter Gowing (1972), a minister in the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, is considered as one of the two pillars of Muslim-Christian relations in the Philippines. Living and working in the context of the university setting, particularly the Siliman University in Dumaguete City, Gowing initiated the annual seminars on Islam in the Philippines and Asia. These seminars not only promoted the dialogue between Muslims and Christians but also included religious leaders and youth. Later, Peter Gowing established the Center for Peace Studies where he pioneered the courses that aimed at educating Christians on Islam and Muslim culture in the Philippines.

Bishop Bienvenido Tudtud (1976) one of the two pillars of Muslim-Christian dialogue in the Philippines started with the basic idea that Christians form themselves into small communities or Basic Ecclesial or Christian Communities BEC’s. Believing in the spirituality of dialogue, i.e. ‘by accepting to live and be with the Muslims’. Thus he pursued this program of dialogue in his own prelature. Later, the good bishop became also known for his radio program at the radio station DXDD, in Ozamis. His ‘dialogue on air’ was considered an effective means to reach the grassroots.31

Other prominent individuals were Bishop Antonino Nepomuceno, Episcopalian Prime Bishop Manguramas, Muslim Shayk-Alim Omar Bajunaid.32 Realizing the importance of uniting together, Christians and Muslims joined hands for the common cause: peace. Slowly they began forming groups to initiate this cause. The Muslim-Christian Leaders Association (1972, Council Leaders from Muslim, Catholic and Protestant) and the Duyog Ramadhan (Muslim-Christian Reconciliation Study Committee by the National Council of Churches in the Philippines) were among these peace groups.33

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32 Father Eliseo Mercado, OMI.
33 Ibid. pp. 366-370
Group Initiatives

Living together and experiencing the same economic, cultural, social and political problems and issues have brought together people from different faiths in Mindanao. With their sincere love for their neighbor, these groups began to share their faith and their lives in dialog to respond to the different events in their lives. Some of these groups are:

_Duyug Ramadhan (Muslim-Christian Reconciliation Study Committee; Formed by the National Council of Churches in the Philippines in the 1970s)_

_Muslim-Christian Religious Leaders Association (Council Leaders from Muslims, Catholic and Protestant; Formed in 1972, the idea began when Muslim, Protestant and Catholic leaders had to deal with the effects of militarization in their respective areas.)_

_Kahayag Foundation (1978; Founded in Davao, the group sponsors the gathering of Muslim-Christian women to discuss and reflect problems and issues concerning women in the Philippines.)_

Diocesan Initiatives

a. Kapapagaria, “Brotherhood” was a foundation created in 1970 as a social action apostolate of the Diocese of Pagadian.

b. Mindanao- Sulu Pastoral Conference and Forum (MSPC, founded in 1971), was a forum created to seek a permanent solution to the conflict in Mindanao. It was composed of bishops, priests, religious and lay people from all the ecclesiastical territories of Mindanao-Sulu.

_Bishops-Ulama Forum_

A product of previous dialogues since the 1970s and 1980s and especially the 1992 National Unification Commission, the forum was held in 1996 composed of five catholic Bishops of Mindanao and ten Ulama at the Ateneo de Manila. Focused on reconciliation and mutual understanding, the dialogues promoted a concrete sharing of beliefs, values and practices.

_Imams-Priests Conference_

Resulting from the suggestion of the Bishops-Ulama Forum, the first Imam-Priests Conference was held in Davao between December 1-4, 1998. Attended by 11 imams and 19 catholic priests, participants exerted efforts to deepen their knowledge of each other and reflected on possible action for peace, development and dialogue.  

_Episcopal Commission for Inter-Religious Dialogue_

In January 1990, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines created the Episcopal Commission for Inter-Religious Dialogue. Prior to this, inter-religious issues were under the Episcopal Commission on Ecumenism.
National/Regional Seminars

In October 1996, a National Workshop on Inter-religious Dialogue and Peace Process took place. 29 dioceses were represented 19 from Mindanao, five from Visayas and five from Luzon.

Local Initiatives

Various problems and issues of the different local communities also made these communities unite and respond to their unique situations related to Christian-Muslim relations.

The Lanao Muslim-Christian Movement for Dialogue and Peace: ILIGAN-MARAWI

Through the efforts of Monsignor Msgr. Desmond Hartford, Aleem Elias Macarandas and Bishop Fernando Capalla, the bi-monthly meetings specifically discussed the peace and order situation and the promotion of better relations between Muslims and Christians. Around 15-20 Muslims and 15-20 Christians, included Muslim women and Catholic lay people from the two provinces.  


Pagadian, Zamboanga del Sur is composed of 11% Muslims, 3% Subanen (Lumad), and 86% Christians. In an effort to unite the people, Bishop Zacharias Jimenez, Aleem Dinas Dimataling and a National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) pastor started to convene the forum. Participants included priests, pastors, ulama, Lumad leaders, Christian lay people and ordinary Christians.

Zamboanga, Basilan, Sulu and Ipil (Zambasuli) Peace Consultation (1994)

Reflecting on the peace and justice situation affecting their communities, the catholic religious leaders of Zamboanga, Basilan, Sulu and Ipil (Zambasuli) held a consultation to discuss ethnic religious tensions, prejudices, misunderstandings, suspicion, mistrust, and violence.

Inter-Religious Dialogue Program: Isabela, Basilan

In the 1990s there had been much tension in Basilan due to kidnappings and extortion. Responding to the situation, the Prelature began its Inter-religious Dialogue Program.

Peace Advocates of Zamboanga 1994 (PAZ)

Wanting to involve themselves directly in the peace and healing process of ethnic and religious relations, the Peace Advocates of Zamboanga (PAZ) a Catholic group opened to work in solidarity and cooperation with Muslims and non-Catholic groups in the building of peace in the Zambasuli region.

Concerned Citizens of Muslims and Christians and Peace Center 1998: Jolo

The concerned citizens of Jolo had their own response to the Zambasuli peace consultations. Composed of representatives from the religious sector, socio-economic NGOs and the academic community, they held regular meetings to study and discuss issues and the problems of both the Muslim and Christian communities.

Local Government, Community and Church Organization 1994 (LOGCCO) Ipil

Responding to the situation peculiar to Ipil, the Prelature initiated inter-religious dialogue among the Subanen (Lumad), Muslims and Christians. Named LONGCO, the forum aimed at promoting peace and development by building harmonious relationships among cultural groups, organizations and the government.
Archdiocesan Center for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Dialogue 1996: Davao

Starting as an ecumenical forum, it took on a more formal organization and initiated activities to promote a culture of peace and dialogue through various programs. 36

Inter-Religious Dialogue- OMI- Muslim Christian Dialogue: Cotobato

Formally begun in 1999, the OMI appointed a priest to specifically take care of the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Ministry. It was aimed at assisting the inter-religious dialogue program of the archdiocese of Cotobato.

‘Dialogue of life’ in Christian Universities

The humble beginnings of the dialogue of life in everyday life found its way within the walls of the universities. In the Philippines, Muslim-Christian dialogue also took great strides in the academic forum: where the many problems and issues of both Muslims and Christians were discussed and shared. Slowly this dialogue found its way into the very structures of the university.

Annual Seminars

Initiated in 1968, the seminars on Muslim-Christian relations were undertaken as ecumenical endeavors and took place in the different colleges or universities of the Mindanao-Sulu area. Among them were the Dansalan College of Marawi city, Notre Dame de Jolo College, and Siliman University. Attended by professors, teachers, government officials, church workers, students and community development workers, these seminars sustained and strengthened the dialogues initiated by the different individuals and groups from the different sectors.

Month long series of Courses

In order to improve understanding among Muslims and Christians, the seminars expanded into the month-long summer courses on Mindanao-Sulu cultures. Focused on educating Christians about Muslim Filipinos, the month long courses helped people orient themselves to the history, cultures and religion of Muslims. It was even extended to a three-month course.

36 P. 395
Research Centers

Christians’ interest and concern for Muslims evolved into more organized and scientific studies. Thus research centers developed. These centers also were hosts to different seminars, programs and dialogues.

a. The Dansalan Research Center (1974) later named as Peter Gowing Memorial Research Center was one that pioneered the education of Christians in Islam Culture and Muslim peoples in the Philippines.

b. International Institute for Islamic Studies. The Southern Philippines Center for Peace Studies (SPCPS) was another center that hoped to contribute through peace research, peace education, and peace action.

c. The Institute of Cultural Studies for Western Mindanao (1979) collects and organizes resource materials on the cultures, ethnic groups, history and religions of Western Mindanao. Established at the Ateneo de Zamboanga, the center aimed at developing understanding based on knowledge.

Catholic Chaplaincy

Dialogue also found its way as a major part of chaplaincy work. This was peculiar to the chaplaincy of the Prelature of Marawi at the Mindanao State University (1976). Here the chaplaincy sponsored a series of meetings among Muslim and Christian students.

Centers for the Development of a Culture of Peace

Dialogue was not only confined to the educational structure and system of schools and universities. In fact, Catholic and other private schools including the madrasas contributed to the propagation of ‘dialogue,’ not only by integrating inter-religious dialogue and the culture of peace into their curriculum.

Silsilah Dialogue Institute (Zamboanga)

Established on May 12 1986, the Silsilah Dialogue Institute offers courses on Islam, Christianity, inter-religious dialogue and the culture of dialogue.

Notre Dame University of Cotobato Peace Education Center and Institute for Inter-Religious Relations (60% Christian - 40% Muslim)

Integrating peace education as part of its curriculum, the university (1988) developed a course and modules to promote the values of peace in all the colleges of the university. Starting with its own faculty, with both staff and students, the program reached out to other schools.

Ateneo de Zamboanga and the Institute of Cultural Studies for Western Mindanao 1991 (85 % Catholic 15% Muslim)

Committing itself to be an agent of peace based on knowledge, understanding, respect and mutual acceptance, the school offered Islamic studies, recollection or retreats for Muslim students and conducted by Muslim teachers and ustade (imams, clerics). Christianity was offered to Catholic students.
Archdiocesan Center for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Dialogue (ACEID): Davao

The Archdiocesan Center for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Dialogue was formally organized in 1997. While it included both ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, it did not only sponsor curriculum development on inter-religious dialogue and peace education for Catholic schools.

Peace Center of the Vicariate of Jolo with the Notre Dame of Jolo College

Established in 1998 by the Vicariate of Jolo and the Notre Dame of Jolo College, the Peace Center focused on education for peace and dialogue. Together, they ran a summer youth peace camp. Gathering Muslim, Christian and Badjao youth, they helped the participants gain deeper understanding of their own culture and faith traditions.

Realizations

Muslims and Christians realized the following:

a) Suspicion, fear, distrust, even hostilities between Christians and Muslims are historically and psychologically rooted.
b) The problems related to Muslim-Christian dialogue are geographical and cultural-religious, too.
c) Muslim-Christian problems in the Philippines are also political in nature.

What to do next?

Much has been done in Muslim-Christian dialogue in the Philippines. Thus, we salute all the men and women of goodwill, Muslims and Christians who have contributed to the birth, growth and development of Muslim-Christian Dialogue in the Philippines.

While seminars, conferences, workshops, courses, consultations have their value and contribute to dialogue, we realize that the multicultural and diverse religious groups in the Philippines, demand different and perhaps unique responses to Muslim-Christian dialogue. We feel that every situation is unique in itself. And we can not expect, and should not even impose, a single solution or answer to resolve the issues related to Muslim-Christian dialogue. Hence, the following may be taken:

a) Catholic universities may start conducting empirical studies to really assess in a systematic way the impact of peace education in promoting peace in Mindanao.
b) Considerations must be given to localities: peculiarities of historical-social factors, the beliefs and feelings of peoples, and the sub-culture of the place. With these, better understanding and cooperation between Muslims and Christians will be enhanced. Localities should thus realize the uniqueness of each place. Sensitivity must also be accorded to other indigenous groups. The challenge is for Catholic universities to integrate these into their curriculum.
c) The dialogue at the grassroots or ‘basic Christian community’ level must be pursued. Information and transformation of peoples at this level is a conditio sine quo non to translate dialogue at the levels of the marginalized groups and the mainstream of Philippine society. The Catholic universities can pursue these within their structures and as outreach programs.
d) There is the need to strengthen Muslim-Christian dialogue beyond the church or school-university based systems. Though these structures may not only be the reasons for the success or failure of programs for dialogue and peace, organizational structures are important in as much as these help ensure the continuity of visions, goals or objectives. Structures for inter-religious dialogues then may be reinforced at the grassroots, parochial, and diocesan level. The challenge perhaps would be how to integrate with the particular socio-political system or structures of the community like the barangay (smallest political unit in a town), town, region, or even at the national government level. Continuing research and cooperation can be pursued by the universities along these lines.
e) New ways or methods of dialogue that also incorporate the economic, social-cultural, and political

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37 ARMM in Transition Series, Institute for Autonomy and Governance, September 8, 2005 No. 3
systems of the locality should be developed. In fact, dialogue groups have become helpless when dealing with the radical-fundamentalist groups who espouse violence and conduct criminal activities. Particular studies in dealing with the armed and/or fundamentalist groups should be encouraged.

f) Muslim-Christian dialogue should slowly become sensitive and open to other religious groups, especially the indigenous groups. Understanding, care and concern must also be given to them. Studies and research for a common ground among Filipino Muslims, Christians, and indigenous groups are encouraged to promote better understanding, respect and acceptance.

Conclusion

Our geography, history, politics, diverse cultures and the extreme and superficial versions of Christianity and Islam have been blurring our attitudes and understanding towards each other. These have led to distortions and unfairness. Our judgment of each other has often been distorted because we have taken the extremes to be the norm. The great challenge therefore is to learn to understand and accept each other. To find a common ground, we have to educate ourselves into a new generation with a different attitude and cultural outlook. We have to show trust, mutual respect, and tolerance. There is no better way to do this than to live together. We have to begin accepting and respecting each other. It is in this atmosphere that true and real dialogue begins and it begins with a sincere life, a ‘Life in dialogue’ - Living together in peace and for peace.

38 Eliseo Mercado, Jr., OMI. “Understanding the Relations Between Christians and Muslims.” Available from the World Wide Web: Http://members.tripod.com/bugsbytes/bb_essays_2002_01.html