

## Living the Dialogue of Life

*In this final article on religious dialogue, Mark Hensman explores two settings in which the dialogue of life is lived: neighbourhoods and schools. He reflects on one neighbourhood in particular: two villages in western Thailand; and a new approach being developed to the dialogue of life in the context of education.*

### Living the Dialogue of Life in a Neighbourhood

During 1997-1999, I conducted research in two villages in Kanchanaburi, the western province of Thailand. One village is comprised almost totally of Buddhists; the other is comprised of Buddhists and Catholics. Both villages and their two distinctive religious communities, have for 20 years, worked together on joint projects and regularly attended each other's ceremonies. Interestingly, the Buddhist and Catholic villagers rarely talk together about their distinctive beliefs and practices, nor do they participate in each others' ceremonies. Rather, they observe.



Based on the wide range of observations made in a diversity of settings, each community draws conclusions about the other community's beliefs and practices. Catholic residents suggest that it will be better for the Buddhists now that they have their own temple: it will help them to feel more relaxed. Some of the Buddhist women, speaking at the new temple after a ceremony there, said that they now felt more complete, like the Catholic villagers. Buddhist residents interviewed at the Catholic Christmas celebrations suggested that the Catholic community gave presents to everyone else because they felt

sorry for the poor. Asked why Fr Antonio, the Catholic priest, was deemed to personify the 'good person' characteristics, so important in Thai Buddhist values, Buddhist respondents suggested that it was because he gave without expecting anything in return.

Both communities display two predominant values, based on, fed by and reinforced by their observations: community is valued; and religions help people to be good. These values enable them to value each other on the one hand, despite their religious distinctions, and on the other hand, to maintain their distinctive beliefs and practices without dilution or compromise.

Both communities do adopt attitudes and values from the other, but these serve to enhance their own beliefs and practices, not to initiate syncretic changes.

The dialogue of life, then, whether it be in a village or a city; in Asia or Australasia; in a factory or on a farm, is the interaction of people from different religious traditions in which the interaction facilitates the opportunity to observe and be observed; to teach and to learn. For each of us, we would wish to be participants in the encounter and subjects for observation. In that role we should model servanthood and peacefulness in a world deformed by power, anger and destruction.

### The Dialogue of Life as a Resource in Schools

As with the dialogue of life in neighbourhoods, students and teachers in schools in which a diversity of religious adherence is present, are involved in the dialogue of life.

The manner in which students and teachers interact within and between their peer groups, constitutes a dialogue of attitudes, values and beliefs. The school environment, however, has the potential to throw the spotlight on these interactions in a manner that more explicitly can work towards an enhancement of understanding and cooperation.

I am currently involved in establishing a Centre for Interfaith Understanding at the Prem Tinsulanonda Centre for International Education (PTCIE) in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The PTCIE will be largely involved in working with senior high school students, both from Thailand and abroad. The Interfaith Centre aims to facilitate informal dialogue awareness rather than formal dialogue consultations. It will work with functional groups already working together, such as groups of students and/or teachers who already know each other in the classroom, staffroom, sportsfield or club.

The Interfaith Centre will attempt to identify the dialogue of life as it already exists within these functional relationships. This will be achieved either in the settings in which they usually interact or in settings different to the ones in which they usually operate. The latter can include the wilderness or a home for young children with AIDS. In the process of working together in either kind of environment, normal or out of the

ordinary, by their actions, they will be involved in the dialogue of their attitudes, values and beliefs.

Discussions in which this 'dialogue' can be identified and reflected upon will occur, thereby, providing the opportunity to further enhance their desire and ability to understand each other and collaborate. The goal, then, is to foster an awareness that dialogue will have been occurring over the time that the relationships have been functional. Consequently, it becomes possible to identify religious diversity as a resource rather than a barrier.

Schools with professional development programmes, outdoor education programmes, and community service orientations, particularly in schools in which religious education occurs, have environments already conducive to exploring the dialogue of life in this manner. If you would like to be in 'dialogue' regarding any such initiatives that you may think about taking, feel free to contact me by email ([hensman@tridhos.ac.th](mailto:hensman@tridhos.ac.th)). In the meantime, be it in the neighbourhood or in the school, enjoy the ongoing challenge of living in dialogue. It is none other, than the challenge of living.

*Mark Hensman*