Report of the ICP Interfaith Women’s Journey to Kolkata,
September 27th-30th, 2015

(Report prepared by Dr Deepali Bhanot, Coordinator of the Journey)

An Interfaith ICP Interfaith Women’s Journey to Kolkata was undertaken from the September 27th-30th, 2015. The ICP Women’s team to Kolkata included the following participants:

List of Participants:

Ms Shahina Khatib, (Muslim), Nagpur
Ms Mamdooha Majid (Muslim), Delhi
Ms Dolma Yangchen (Buddhist), Himachal Pradesh
Ms Kalsang Youdon (Buddhist), Himachal Pradesh
Ms Sribala Mylavarapu, (Hindu), Hyderabad
Rev. Satvasheela Pandhare, (Christian), Kolkata
Ms Vihutoli Kinimi (Christian), Kolkata

Dr Deepali Bhanot, (Hindu), Delhi, Coordinator

Dr M.T. Cherian, Associate Dean, The SCEPTRE: Local Coordinator

Rev. Packiam Samuel, PhD, Secretary ICP, Advisor

All the participants of the women’s journey arrived at the Guest House, the SCEPTRE, Shrachi Centre, 74-B, A.J.C. Bose Road, Kolkata – 700016, by the evening of the 27th September, 2015

A meeting of the participants was held after all the members had arrived.

There were three new members - Ms Dolma Yangchen, Rev. Satvasheela Pandhare and Ms Vihutoli Kinimi who were participating in this ICP Interfaith Women’s Journey for the first time.

The new participants were welcomed by the group and after every one had introduced themselves, an orientation programme regarding the ICP Interfaith women’s journey was held. This was followed by a discussion on the daily schedule and the objectives of the journey for the next three days.

It was a joyful occasion as some members of the journey had met after almost one year when they had met at the review meeting at HMI in Hyderabad in September, 2014. Although the ICP women keep in touch with each other through phone and email, it is always an exciting time to meet face to face and update each other personally. The members shared with others the interfaith activities and their work on women’s issues that they had been engaged in during the past several months.
Objectives of the Journey:

- To encourage members from different faith groups to live together and to overcome the challenges of interpersonal differences in a positive spirit.
- To learn from each other the commonalities between different faith groups.
- To carry an inter-faith message of peace & reconciliation in the places visited by the group.
- To establish interfaith understanding, tolerance and respect for other religions.
- To learn from the women of different faith groups their views on interfaith cooperation and harmony.
- To learn how women from other faith groups are engaged in empowering women socially, economically and spiritually.
- To learn how women of faith can be the agents of peace and harmony from the religious women’s group visited.
- To be inspired by the interfaith activities of women visited and to be a source of inspiration in our own circles on our return from the journey.

Visiting Mother Theresa’s Home:

The first visit was made to Mother Theresa’s Home. The Guest house where we stayed was almost opposite to the “Jora Girja” or the St James Church and the Mother House of the Missionaries of Charity was within walking distance located at 54-A, A.J.C. Bose Road. As we turned into the narrow lane, a simple board announced the address of this very important holy place.

At the entrance of the House were situated a statue of Mother Mary, flanked by a statue of Mother Theresa. It was a very simple house that was established by Mother Theresa in 1950 for the service of the suffering humanity. We were informed that no photography was allowed inside the House except at Mother Theresa’s Tomb. In the courtyard was a large board that carried pictures and information from the life and work of Mother Theresa. We then entered the room where Mother’s Tomb was situated. The
group paid their respects to Mother Theresa at the white marble tomb decorated with bright yellow flowers that formed Mother’s message, “Love until it hurts”.

In the adjacent room was a small museum with pictures of Mother in various stages of her life and service and finally, death. It also exhibited her sandals and her simple enamel dinner bowl, her sari, rosary and the crucifix. Across the courtyard a staircase led us to Mother Theresa’s simple room where she lived, praying, loving and serving God from 1953 until her death in 1997. The tiny room had a small bed, a bare wooden table with a wooden bench and a writing table with a wooden stool. It was very humbling experience to witness the simple life-style led by the Mother who had been an ocean of love and kindness to the abandoned orphans, the homeless, the sick, the needy and the dying. The building also housed the many female volunteers and Sisters who have dedicated their lives for the selfless service to the suffering and needy.

Small pictures of Mother Theresa and booklets about her life were available at the museum to be taken away as souvenirs. The visit to this holy place of pilgrimage was indeed a very memorable one. The group spent some quiet time at the serene and peaceful Mother’s House and left for the next destination at the Bishop’s College.

Meeting with the students of the Bishop’s College:

The ICP women’s group visited the Bishop’s College for an interactive session with its young undergraduate women students. The Bishop’s College is a Theological College that offers a four-year Bachelor of Divinity Programme which is affiliated with the Senate of Serampore College that serves as an organizing body of theological education in India. An Inter-Religious Dialogue Programme has also been started in this college since 1991.

Prof Ralte, few faculty members and a group of about twelve young female students greeted the visitors. The ICP women’s group and the students gathered in the Church premises for an interactive session. The students who hailed from different parts of India like Orissa, Nagaland, Assam, Chhattisgarh and Manipur informed the visitors that the Bishop’s College trains women to become Pastors and that they had joined this institution due to their immense faith in God. It was heartening to find that more women were emerging as faith leaders, priests and preachers who would be revisiting the sacred scriptures and interpreting these from a feminine perspective as well.

During the meeting, the ICP women’s group and the college students introduced themselves to each other. The students were informed about the activities of ICP and especially about the
objectives of the interfaith women’s journey. The discussion focussed on the ecumenical movement, women’s movement, the need for the study of religion and interfaith dialogue. One of the students, Rev Sushma Kumar, is an ordained priest from Chhattisgarh who has been a practising priest for the past eighteen years. She pointed out that within the Church; steps are needed to empower the women pastors who sometimes face challenges of gender discrimination. The group also discussed about the urgent need for inter-faith cooperation and understanding in the current situation in India where instances of intolerance are on the rise. The group also highlighted the important role that the women of faith can play in bringing about inter-religious harmony and peace by reaching out to other faith groups in a true spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding.

After the end of the discussion with the students that lasted about two hours, the ICP women’s group met the Principal of the college and thanked him for providing the group with the opportunity of interacting with the students.

**Visiting the Jain Sadhvis (female monks) at Howrah:**

A meeting with the Jain Sadhvis had been fixed with the help of the Secretary, Terapanthi Jain Community in Kolkata. The Jain nuns were staying at the other end of the city. Hence, it took us more than an hour to reach their place through the heavy traffic, which is so characteristic of Kolkata. When we reached the address that was given to us, it transpired that they had moved from there to another location. So we had to spend some more time locating their new address. Interestingly, we did not have any direct access to these Jain nuns as men and devotees regulated and arranged for their stay. As these nuns have renounced the world, they have no permanent address and they are perpetually on the move except for the four months during the monsoon (Chaturmasa). Their next destination is always decided by the Acharya, the head of the Jain Shwetambar Terapanthi order.

We were able to meet five of the Terpanthi Jain Sadhvis, who were dressed in plain cotton white saris, and who had been provided with the living quarters by the ‘Uttar (North)Howrah Shri Jain Shwetambar Terapanthi Sabha Trust’ for the next few days. The place where they were staying was a big hall with small adjacent simple rooms with practically no furniture. The austere meeting hall had only one bare wooden bed like a table on which the Guru ji sat. The devotees and the other sadhvis sat on the floor…although there were some plastic chairs for the devotees who could not manage to sit on the floor.

Already a large group of women devotees all attired in similar yellow and red coloured saris had gathered ahead of us and were listening to the Head Sadhvi, who was also addressed as ‘Guru ji’ (revered teacher). These women had travelled together in a group from a nearby suburban place to pay their respects to the visiting Jain monks. Their meeting had almost come to an end and they were preparing to offer food to the female monks.
The leader of the group, ‘Guru Mahatapvasvi Acharya Maha Shramani ji’ welcomed us. After having introduced the ICP women’s group and the purpose of the interfaith women’s journey, the members requested Guruji to tell them about the philosophy and life-style followed by the Jain female monks.

A lively question-answer session followed wherein, Guruji informed the group that in the Jain tradition, the Terapanth is a sub-sect of the Shwetambar (White-dressed) Jain faith group. The founder of this subsect, Acharya Bhikkanaji laid stress on 13 religious principles i.e. (1) **five mahavratas** (vows) – absolute non-violence, absolute truthfulness, absolute non-stealing, absolute celibacy and absolute non-attachment, (2) **five samitis** (regulations) and (3) **three guptis** (controls or restraints). Sadhus and Sadhvis are those who have voluntarily given up their household lives and worldly attachments to live as monks and have adopted the five mahavratas to follow a spiritual path for the upliftment of their souls. Their entire life is dedicated to self-purification and self-realisation.

Thus, any woman can take on the life of a Jain monk after getting permission from the family and the Acharya. But it is a very rigorous life of self-discipline for a Jain female monk. She herself had renounced this worldly life for the last twenty years. The female monks have practically no worldly possessions and have no permanent address. When a female monk is ordained to become a ‘sannayasin’, she is required to wear only white unstitched or minimally stitched cloth. The head is shorn off of all hair by plucking out each strand by hand and she is supposed to move about barefoot wherever she has to go. Guruji informed us that they had come in a group from Delhi to Kolkata on foot and wherever they go, they are not allowed to use any type of vehicle. The Sadhvis rise early in the morning at 4.00 a.m., remain engrossed in meditation and daily austerities and reading of scriptures (Jain agamas). It is important to be truly religious in one’s life. Mere observance of rituals and visiting temples or places of worship are of no use if you are not religious at heart. For food, they go out for Bhiksha (alms) which is also known as ‘Gochari’ as they do not cook anything for themselves. Also, they must not eat before sunrise and after sundown.

As mentioned above, a group of women devotees who had come to visit these monks had brought a variety of food with them and had asked one of the Sadhvis to take food on behalf of the others. Although there was a lot of food, yet they took only a little keeping in mind the severe austere path chosen by them.

This visit was a unique experience for the entire group who had not interacted with any Jain group before and especially with the female monks of the Jain faith. It was a very educative session for understanding the principles of the Jain faith tradition. One of the Sadhvis, Sadhvi Kalpayasha is a Postgraduate in Philosophy from the Ladnun University in Rajasthan. But she has renounced the world in pursuit of spiritual advancement. On the subject of ‘Santhara’ (giving up one’s life by refraining from food and water), she said that one has to get the permission of the Acharya to do so.

The ICP members also interacted with the group of women devotees who had gathered there. These ladies belonged to the Jain business community where women (home-makers) usually do not travel far without male escorts. But they had travelled unescorted by train in a group to
meet their Guruji and appeared to be quite empowered and having a very nice ‘me-time’, meeting the monks and the members of the ICP team.

**A meeting of the Members of the ICP women’s Journey was organised during the journey.** The meeting focussed on each member’s personal experience of the journeys held so far. It dwelt on asking each member to do some introspection to understand how these journeys have affected them. They were also encouraged to discuss about how to improve upon the interfaith women’s journeys.

The following points emerged from the discussions that ensued. The members felt that the experience of living together with the followers of other faith tradition has really enriched their personal lives. They have become not only become more aware about the various aspects of each other’s faith traditions but have also become stronger in their own faiths. It was strongly felt that without understanding one’s own religion, one cannot understand others. The prejudices and misunderstandings about others fade away when personal interaction takes place.

The members affirmed that they have also acquired a deeper understanding of inter-personal relationships and are mindful of the personal change that they have undergone. They have become very conscious of not hurting the feelings of others. This has had a very positive effect on their attitude towards others and each one in her own special way has been transmitting it within their families and the people that they interact with.

One important observation made by one of the new members was that in an interfaith journey, we have to begin with ‘learning to unlearn’ so that we would learn more and engage more seriously in our interfaith journeys. Moreover, we need to learn listen more to others.

The women’s journey has helped the members to become more humane and concerned about the sufferings of others. They also shared their experiences about how they have been motivated to help the less privileged through cash, kind and service.

The participants felt that their most important achievement has been that they have been instrumental in spreading the message of inter-faith harmony and peace with all the women’s groups that they have met during these journeys. By meeting women from various faith groups and organizations in different parts of the country, during the earlier journeys, the ICP women’s group has been able to create an interfaith network of women in the areas visited by them.

It was felt that there was a lot more to be achieved through these interfaith women’s journeys to strengthen the interfaith women’s network across the country.
Visiting the All Bengal Muslim Women’s Association:

The ICP members visited the All Bengal Muslim Women’s Association at their Head Office and Vocational Training Institute at 17, Syed Amir Ali Avenue. Although, the General Secretary, Mrs Suboohi Aziz was away due to some urgent work, the President of the organization, Mrs Noorjahan Shakeel and some members of ABMWA welcomed the ICP team with great enthusiasm.

The ABMWA was established in 1986 for the upliftment of the underprivileged women and children. The real motive of the organization is to create religious and educational awareness among Muslim women and also to train them in modern arts and skills to become self-dependent and self-sufficient. Since its establishment, the members of ABMWA have been voluntary workers engaged towards women’s educational and economic empowerment and helping needy women from any faith group. The organization, which is funded by Zakat and donations, also runs an orphanage that houses about 200 girls.
The President, Mrs Noorjahan Shakeel, who is also a member of the Muslim Personal Law Board, informed the visitors that ABMWA has about 250 members. She introduced the members who were present at the meeting. It was a delight to meet young and not so young educated bright Muslim women who had dedicated their spare time in training young Muslim women to make a career for themselves. Classes of spoken English and Islamic studies are also held along with a number of vocational training courses. The organization not only provides training but also finds job-placement for its students and encourages them towards self-employment. Being a member of the Muslim Personal Law Board, Mrs Shakeel, said that they also deal with the personal and marital problems of the Muslim women and provide free legal aid.

After self-introductions, all the members of the ICP group had a nice interaction with the members present and also with the many students who were pursuing different vocational courses like tailoring, embroidery, beauty-culture etc. The ICP members shared with them about their interfaith journey. The members of ABMWA indicated that they would be very happy to have a continued relationship with ICP. At the end of the meeting, a group picture was taken to remember the occasion.

**Visiting the St Paul’s Cathedral:**

The participants visited the famous St Paul’s Cathedral in Kolkata. This ancient Church was built in 1847 and is dedicated to St Paul. Apart from being a place of worship, the Church is known for its grand architecture and attracts visitors from all faith groups. A young priest gave the ICP visitors a tour of the Church and explained the history of its construction. He mentioned that it took seven years to build the Church in the Indo-Gothic style of architecture before it was opened for worship in 1847. Two earthquakes in 1897 and then in 1934 led to the renovation of the Church in different phases. The main hall contained beautifully carved wooden church benches and chairs. The life of St Paul is depicted through many pictures and representations of his holy deeds.
The ICP members were mesmerised by the enormous architecture and grandeur of the Church. They spent some time in quiet meditation in the Main Hall. Unfortunately, no photography was allowed inside the Church, so the members had to be content with a picture on the stairs at the entrance of the Cathedral.

**Meeting with Fr Packiam Samuel:**

A meeting of the ICP members was held with Fr Packiam Samuel, who was visiting Kolkata for some other work. The members took advantage of his visit to Kolkata and requested him to take some time out of his busy schedule for a meeting.

During the meeting, the members updated Fr Samuel on the present journey and also recounted their personal experiences of the journey. They requested him to kindly arrange for at least two interfaith women’s journeys each year in order to strengthen the religious women’s network. They apprised him of the positive influence that these journeys had on the participants and on the groups visited by them. And how it has not only broadened their outlook and perspective but has also brought about a tremendous change in their own personal lives.

Speaking to the members of the journey, Fr Samuel said that the three most important aspects of Spirituality are: charity, patience and kindness. Charity is not how much you can give but it is more important what you can give. Patience has to be inculcated in oneself to understand not only others but also one’s own self. Kindness to all without any reservations does elevate one spiritually. Spirituality is also productivity. Listening from each other is also very important. Quoting Mohammad Iqbal, Fr. Samuel said that Spirituality is not static like the lofty Himalayas rather it is more dynamic and comes in waves and one should be prepared to receive the same.

With regard to the relationship between religion and faith, he said that religion is our own making but faith is what God gives us; religion is arrogance but faith is humility and while religion masks the face of God instead of revealing it, faith reveals the face of God to the worshipper. He further added that interfaith work is all about self-transformation.
Towards the end of the meeting, a few members of the ABMWA arrived with their husbands and joined the group. They had been very impressed with the work being done by ICP and they wished to be associated with it. When they learnt that Fr Samuel would be in town to meet us, they seized the opportunity to come over and join us. Thus, they reaffirmed the interfaith bond that had started during the meeting with ABMWA.

**Visiting Belur Math:**

The group left for Belur Math situated in the Howrah District and after over an hour’s drive reached the place. The Coordinator had already corresponded with the authorities and Swami Chandrakantananda of the relief section had deputed one young Swami Sridip Maharaj to give the ICP members a detailed tour of Belur Math which is also the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Mission, and is spread over forty acres of land on the western bank of the Hooghly river (Ganga).

Giving a brief history of the place, Swami Sridip Maharaj said that Swami Vivekananda, the foremost disciple of Swami Ramakrishna, had attained worldwide fame after his speeches at the World Parliament of Religions, in 1893 and had come to be known as the “messenger of Indian wisdom to the western world”. On his return to Kolkata, he set up the “Ramakrishna Mission” in 1897 to propagate and implement Sri Ramakrishna’s message for the welfare of humanity and religious harmony. This is an organization in which both the monks and lay people participate together to propagate the wisdom of Vedanta and also to open and run charitable institutions like hospitals, schools, colleges, hostels etc for social service and which also undertake massive relief work in situations of flood, famine or any natural disasters to mitigate the suffering of the masses.

In 1898, Swami Vivekananda acquired a huge piece of land at Belur on the western bank of the Ganges and got it registered as Ramakrishna Math. Due to being situated at Belur, this came to be popularly known as Belur Math. Swami Vivekananda spent the last years of his life at this place and was cremated on the banks of the river Ganges that flows alongside the Math. The room where he lived during his last years and attained ‘Mahasamadhi’ has been preserved for the visitors to see and to draw inspiration from this great personality.

Swami Vivekananda had himself designed the Belur Math and had faced many challenges to get it built. The huge area of Belur Math contains temples dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna, Ma Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda. The entire campus is full of lush green lawns and gardens giving the place a serene look.

The Ramakrishna Museum, which was opened in 1994 in an old building at Belur Math, was shifted to the new building in 2001. After a tour of all the temples, a visit to the ghat at the river bank, the participants visited the Museum that houses different exhibits that give a glimpse of rural Bengal where Sri Ramakrishna was born and brought up. As one walks around the museum, one gets a cursory view of India’s ancient cultural history to the advent of Sri Ramakrishna, his life and the great souls who inspired the Ramakrishna Movement. The articles displayed at the Museum present the history of Ramakrishna Math and Mission. A video presentation gives an idea of how the Ramakrishna movement is spreading in India.
At the end of the tour, the participants were guided to the bookstore from where they purchased various publications of Ramakrishna Mission. No photography was allowed in the premises of Belur Math. Hence, at the end of tour, the participants thanked Swami Sridip Maharaj and requested him to pose for a picture with them outside in the open courtyard.

Visiting the Dakshineshwar Kali Temple:

The participants arrived at the famous Dakshineshwar Temple built by Rani Rashmoni and dedicated to the Goddess Kali, situated on the eastern side of the river, across the Belur Math, in the afternoon but were very disappointed to find that the temple had closed during noon and would reopen only at 4.00 p.m.

Due to the reason that the group had an appointment to visit the Sri Sarada Math and The Ramkrishna Sarada Mission to meet the female monks of the Ramakrishna Order at 4.00 p.m., they had to content themselves by seeing the magnificent temple from outside and spend some time there admiring the beauty and the grandeur of the huge temple.

Visiting Sri Sarada Math at Dakshineshwar:

The group then proceeded to the Sarada Math and had a difficult time locating the place but were there at the appointed hour. From outside the Math appeared to be a very modest place with a high gate that was locked from inside and which did not provide any view of what was inside. This meant that the place was not open to all like the Belur Math and entry to this centre was restricted.

Once inside, the participants found themselves in a sprawling area with a path leading to the Math office and further down to a big temple with a huge meditation hall. Beyond the temple was a restricted area that belonged to the living quarters of the female monks living in the Math. No one could be seen around; hence the guard was requested to inform The General Secretary, Pravrajika Amalapraṇa with whom we had an appointment about our arrival. While we waited for her, the members visited the temple.
Pravrajika Amalaprana, turned out to be a senior lady monk who met us in the Math office. The ICP group introduced themselves and told her about the ICP women’s journey. She was very happy to receive the group and to answer the many questions that were posed to her. She said that when Swami Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Math and Mission to train a band of Sannyasins (monks) to attain self-realization and to dedicate themselves to service of humanity, he had a strong desire to start a similar organization for women. He knew that there would be no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women was improved. He made Sri Sarada Ma a central figure for this cause. Despite his best wishes, the women’s Math could not be established in his lifetime. But almost 50 years after his Mahasamadhi, the Sarada Math came into existence in 1954. Sister Nivedita who had come from London had committed herself to serve the women with the help of some other dedicated women here.

Sri Sarada Math and the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission with their branches are distinct institutions but they are closely related. The main workers of the Sarada Mission are the Sannyasinis (female monks) of Sri Sarada Math. Both the organizations take up charitable and philanthropic activities. While the former emphasizes religion and preaching, the latter is concerned with the welfare of women and children in activities like educational work, medical service, rural upliftment work, relief and help to the needy and spreading cultural and spiritual ideas and so on. Like the Ramakrishna Mission, the Sarada Mission has centres all over the country and about 32 centres all over the world.

At present this centre has about 70 Sannyasinis and about 25 Brahmacharinis and Probationers. The Probationers have to undergo four-year training and after becoming Brahmacharinis they have to serve for four more years to reach the final stage of the Sannyasinis. They have to follow an austere life-style of self-discipline throughout their lives.
The participants received quite a few publications regarding the lives of the important Sannyanisinis of the Sri Sarada Mission order. But they did not have an opportunity to interact with the female monks as they were involved in the evening prayers and austerities.

With this last visit, the ICP Interfaith women’s journey came to an end.

Outcome of the journey:

- The interfaith women’s journey to Kolkata was an important event as the participants were exposed to a variety of women’s groups from different faith traditions.

- They were inspired by the lives of great women like Blessed Mother Theresa, Ma Sri Sarada Devi and great men like Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

- Meeting the Female monks and the Guruji of the Terapanth Jain Order who have given up the worldly life of comfort and pleasure and have chosen the austere path of
monkhood for not only self-purification but also to guide the lay believers as religious teachers was an unique experience.

- Visiting Sannyasini Pravrajika Amalaprana at the Sarada Math we learnt how women monks despite having renounced this world, have fully dedicated themselves to the call of Swami Vivekananda and are actively engaged in relief work and towards the service of the suffering humanity at large.

- It was very inspiring to meet the dynamic Muslim women of ABMWA who are engaged in not only imparting religious teachings to young girls but are also actively engaged in empowering them economically through various skill training for their holistic development.

- Meeting with the young students of the Bishop’s College who are being trained to become priests and meeting the members of All Bengal Muslim Association provided the participants an opportunity to expand and strengthen the already growing ICP women’s interfaith network.

- The members affirmed that they have acquired a deeper understanding of interpersonal relationships and are mindful of the personal change that they have undergone.

- The participants have returned with a renewed vigour to strengthen the interfaith activities in their local areas.

Deepali Bhanot, Ph.D,
Coordinator, ICP Interfaith women’s Journey to Kolkata