Interfaith Coalition for Peace organized an Interfaith Women’s Journey to Ahmadabad from the 11th-14th April, 2013. The journey included ten women representing Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism and Tibetan Buddhism.

The group reached Ahmadabad in the morning of the 11th April, 2013 and participated in the day-long Seminar on "Interfaith & Religious Harmony for Peace and Development" organised by the Orthodox Diocese of Ahmadabad and Interfaith Coalition for Peace. Most Rev Stanislaus Fernandez, Arch Bishop of Gandhinagar Presided over the Seminar which was inaugurated by His Holiness Swami Adhyatmanandjī Saraswati, President of Shivanand Ashram, Ahmedabad. His Grace Dr Geevarghese Mar Yulios and Fr Packiam Samuel, Secretary of ICP presented the felicitations. Papers on Religious Harmony and Peace were presented by eminent scholars. Dr Deepali Bhanot made a Presentation on: “Role of Women in the Perspective of Interfaith Harmony and Community Development”. His Grace Geevarghese Mar Yulios chaired the session.

During the Seminar the participants had a chance to meet various important people who have been involved with various organizations working for Communal harmony and Peace. Dr Deepali Bhanot was able to fix up meetings with a few such groups for the next two days. After the Seminar the participants were invited to a dinner hosted by His Grace Geevarghese Mar Yulios at the Sarovar Portico Hotel.
In the morning of 12th April, 2013, the group first visited the **Brahma Kumari’s Center** at the invitation of **Brahma Kumari Vinayana**. They were given a warm welcome and were taken on a tour of the exhibition hall along with a guide to explain the path of worship and philosophy followed by the Brahma Kumaris. Later Brahma Kumari Dr Kokila addressed the group about how to overcome mental stress and attain happiness. According to her “adjustment and understanding are the highway for attaining happiness”. She said that the five key words to happiness were: ‘No comparison; no competition; no confusion; no criticism and no question’.

The second visit was to the **Sabarmati Ashram / Mahatma Gandhi’s Home** which is a pictorial museum depicting the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi. The museum, situated on the bank of the Sabarmati river, also houses the austere rooms where Gandhiji spent some years of his life.

The next meeting was at the office of **DISHA** (Developing Initiatives For Social & Human Action), Gandhi Ashram. The Director of DISHA, **Ms Paulomee Mistry** and Mr Vipul Bhai, one of the very active members of DISHA met the group and spoke about their work. This group has been working with the Tribal Communities and the migrant workers (unorganised sectors) for their Human Rights. DISHA has two programs: formation of Trade Unions of the migrant labourers / construction workers and Community Based Organisation (CBOs) in the rural areas working for Human rights and Child Rights. They involve the unemployed youth in their activities – thus giving them a platform to work. DISHA also works with religious organizations like the Swami Narain Temple and the Jain community who provide relief measures during monsoon like water-proof sheets etc and regularly provide food grains as donations to the poor workers. DISHA is a member-based organisation has five branch offices and has about 1.5 lakhs members.

After a sumptuous Gujarati lunch at a popular Gujarati restaurant, the group visited the **KSSS (Kaira Social Service Society)** – Diocesan Social Service Centre for Justice, Peace, Development & Human Dignity at one of their centre at Gomti pura. **Mr Shailesh Kambhaliya**, Program Coordinator, peace Building of KSSS received the group in a tiny residential room situated in a very crowded slum area in Gomtipura. This house serves as a meeting place for all the members of KSSS during their field visits. This is a very sensitive area and was the worst hit during the 2002 communal clashes. KSSS, under the Ahmadabad Dioceses, has been working in this area since 1967 when the
first communal riot took place. The second clashes took place after the Babri Masjid demolition and the worst in 2002. Although both the communities had totally lost faith in each other, the Peace-building efforts of KSSS has resulted in bringing the conflicting communities together and works for women’s empowerment, HIV/AIDS, Community based disaster preparedness, child rights, peace building and communal harmony. It was very heartening to find local women from Muslim, Hindu and Christian community sitting together in great harmony and working together under the SHG schemes and building a very peaceful society. The children from all communities are involved in various activities along with value education. Seminars and camps are organised for the youth who are also taken out to tours and exposed to lectures by various religious leaders. Whereas on the one hand the women narrated their tales of horror during the riots, they also spoke of how people across communities reached out to each other in moments of great tension, suspicion and fear. They happily responded to all the questions posed by the visiting team and also seemed to be very happy and peaceful working together.

The two young ladies who teach the little children demonstrated how they involve the children in games to bring about a sense of great friendship and respect to each other and also tell them about different religions, their rituals and festivals. This visit was a very rewarding experience for the ICP team because here was a great example of true interfaith harmony and peace.

The next visit was to Parwaaz Sangthan, Rehnuma Society, Near F.D. High School, Juhapura. This Centre was located in a very crowded resettlement colony. It was quite difficult to locate the meeting place despite constant directions being given on the phone by the members. But it was a very pleasant surprise when two young ladies riding a two-wheeler scooter came to look for us as at an appointed place. As the tiny office did not have enough space, all the members of the ICP team sat on the ground in the open courtyard along with the local women. The members of Parwaaj Sangathan belong to different communities and are mostly daily wagers. A number of women showed up for the meeting at a very short notice. Ms Khairun was not available but we met Ms Shamim and Ms Mandakini who introduced us to the group and their activities which were mainly creating awareness about the laws, government scheme and women’s rights. Regular activities include capacity building programmes, empowerment programmes, leadership skills and other programmes to enhance communal harmony.
At the end of the day the group visited Sivananda Ashram, Sri Divya Jivan Sanskritik sangh, Satellite Road. During the seminar the previous day, His Holiness Swami Adhyatmanandji Saraswati had invited the ICP women’s group to visit the ashram and have dinner at night. Swami received the group and took them to a tour of the ashram. The ashram stands on a huge campus with beautiful lawns and garden. The main prayer hall and the Ashta Lakshmi temple were indeed beautiful and magnificent. Swami ji took the group to the visitor’s room where he spoke to them about his journey from the Sivananda ashram in Rishikesh to this branch in Ahmadabad which was started in 1975. This branch is one of the 350 branches of Sivananda ashram around the globe. Swamiji came to this center in 1994 and has been involved in expanding the center and its activities since then. He gave six key-words to the ICP group for achieving a good life: serve, love, give liberally, purify, meditate and realise. His message to the group was, ‘Love all and hate none’. He was very happy to see the participants from Dharamshala and he told them about the anecdotes about his meeting with His Holiness Dalai Lama. After a nice meal at the Ashram, the participants returned to the Hotel.

The next day, on the 13th, the group met for a ‘Breakfast meeting’ for sharing their experiences about the journey. Almost all the participants expressed their delight for having participated in this interfaith journey. They were greatly impressed by the interfaith understanding and peace building in real life when they met the women at KSSS and at Parwaaj Sangthan. The visits to Mahatma Gandhi’s ashram, the Brahma Kumari’s centre and the Sivananda ashram were new experiences to some of the members. It was unanimously decided that the morning be spent doing some site-seeing and visiting the local market. Ms Gladys had requested one contact person of Zakat Foundation, Mr Qutubuddin Tailor to be our escort for the day. It was a great experience to walk through the very busy and extremely crowded shopping area where there was a constant fear of getting lost in the milling crowd.

After lunch we proceeded for a meeting with AMWA (Ahmadabad Muslim Women’s Association) in the crowded resettlement area of Juhapura. We were informed that being a border-area, it is also a very sensitive area. This crowded place houses about 2.5 lakh people belonging to very poor families who had been badly affected by the 2002 communal clashes. The residents are mostly uneducated and are daily wagers. However, some very
Dr Maherunissa Desai, President of AMWA informed us that they had started AMWA about 21 years ago as a women’s empowerment programme but after the riots, they have been engaged in the rehabilitation programme of the dislocated women living in this area. The women are able to avail of small loans from the ‘Zakat Patra’ or the central fund of the SHGs and after having repaid the loans through the income-generating schemes, these women start contributing towards the ‘Zakat patra’ to help other women. In this meeting we got to hear the personal stories of the women affected by the clashes. They spoke about how their houses were burnt down or how their dear ones were killed and how they had suffered personal losses. Some of them even broke down narrating their stories. But now they were very happy to have started all over again and were working hard to make a living for themselves and their children. AMWA is doing very commendable work towards empowering these women.

In the evening, one of the contact person of the Zakat Foundation, Mr Mohsin Khan Sheikh and his parents arrangements for a meeting of the ICP group with the local women from different communities at the New Age School at Juhapura. The Director of the school, Mr Maru, his wife and some staff members of the School also attended the meeting wherein the ICP group members shared their experiences about their visits to the different NGOs in Ahmedabad and their views on communal harmony and interfaith understanding. The local women also expressed their views about how women could be the agents of change in building peace between different communities. The meeting ended with a dinner hosted by the local hosts.

On the way back to the hotel, the group visited the Mosque of ‘Sarkhej Roja’ which comprises one of the most elegant and unique architectural complexes of Ahmedabad and is a very important historical site.

Although it was very late in the evening, Mr Tailor escorted the group through the mosque and the staff
very willingly opened the small museum containing various manuscripts and other objects related to the mosque.

On reaching the hotel, despite the late hour, the group had a small informal meeting as everyone had to depart early in the morning the next day, i.e. on the 14th April, 2013. It was indeed one of the best Interfaith Women’s Journey organized by ICP.

Report by:

Dr Deepali Bhanot, Coordinator,
Women’s group, Interfaith Coalition for Peace

Participants of the ICP Interfaith Women’s Journey:

1. Dr. Deepali Bhanot - Coordinator
2. Dr. Sahina Khatib
3. Dr. Reeta Bhagchi
4. Ms. Mamdooha Majid
5. Sr. Gracy Rebun
6. Sr. Annie
7. Ms. Gladys
8. Ms. Gurmeet Kaur
9. Ms. Kalsang Youdon
10. Ms. Lhamo Tso

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