

The Elijah Institute and Guru Nanak Dev University
Interreligious Training Program for India
Towards a Future of Knowledge, Understanding and
Interreligious Collaboration

At Nishkam International Centre, Amritsar



November 27th – December 3rd, 2010

Introduction:

Elijah's vision of 'sharing wisdom, fostering peace' was advanced significantly in December 2010, when the first 26 graduates of our Education Network's Interreligious Dialogue Training program completed their seminar in Amritsar, India. The Educational Network's India Training Program was designed to implement and develop the Educational Network in India, as a key component of a planned global educational initiative.

As a result of the call of the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders at their meeting in Amritsar in 2007 for religions to 'offer their finest teachings as a resource to guide humanity to safe harbour', Executive Director, Alon Goshen Gottstein, and Director of Educational Activities, Peta Jones Pellach, developed the work of its Educational Network and designed its India Training Program. This project brought Elijah back to Amritsar with a program that engaged religious leaders, academics and interreligious activists from across India and inducted them into the world of interreligious dialogue and sharing of wisdom.

Participants gathered for an intensive week of study of sacred texts, personal reflection, interaction with religious leaders from Elijah's Board and from our scholars, acquiring skills and making new relationships. They were drawn from twelve universities and represented Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, Sikh, Jain and other local religious traditions. They spoke Hindi, Punjabi, Tamil and English and came from major cities and small villages, from Kashmir to Kerala to Madurai, travelling up to three days to join the program. They focused on a common endeavour and completed their week transformed through knowledge and challenging experiences.



The following pages describe the program and its participants and draw conclusions about its effectiveness and its expected impact on the communities from which participants were drawn.

The Participants:

Name	Religion	Institution
Pravin Bhimrao Khandare	Buddhist	Mumbai University
Ven. Gyanaditya Shakya	Buddhist	University of Delhi
Rev. Samuel Rajadurai	Christian	Centre for Social Analysis, Tamilnadu Theological Seminary
Rev. C. Thankappan	Christian	Tamilnadu Theological Seminary
Dr Fr Robin S.Seelan SJ	Christian	Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth
Jayan Joseph	Christian	Madurai Kamaraj University
K.Ravikumar	Folk Religion	Madurai Kamaraj University
Dr Rajpal Singh Negi	Hill Tribes Hindu	HNB Garhwal University
Neelam Negi	Hindu	HNB Garhwal University
Gurdeep Singh	Hindu	Kurukshetra University
Shiv Kumar	Hindu	Kurukshetra University
Dr Kamladevi Kunkolienker	Hindu	PES' SRSN College of Arts and Science
Krantigeeta C. Bhosale	Hindu	University of Pune
P. Guhendran	Hindu (Tamil)	Madurai Kamaraj University
Sivagnanam Jeyashankar	Hindu (Tamil)	Eastern University, Sri Lanka
Dr. Pradyumna Shah Singh	Jain	Punjabi University
Sudha Pandit	Kabir Panthi	University of Pune
Dr. Afroz Ahmad Bisati	Muslim	Islamic University, Kashmir
Prof. Hamidullah Marazi	Muslim	University of Kashmir
Dr. Gurbachan Singh Bachan	Sikh	University of Mumbai
Dr. Ran Singh Dhaliwal	Sikh	Punjabi University
Sukhwinder Singh	Sikh	Guru Nanak Dev University
Apinder Singh	Sikh	Sikh History Research Board
Dr Bharatbeer Kaur		
Sandhu	Sikh	Guru Nanak Dev University
Joginder Singh	Sikh	Guru Nanak Dev University
Dr. Manvinder Singh	Sikh	Guru Nanak Dev University

Student observers:

Samrath Kaur	Sikh	Guru Nanak Dev University
Satwinder Singh	Sikh	Sikh History Research Board
Jorawar Singh	Sikh	Guru Nanak Dev University
Balwinder Singh	Sikh	Sikh History Research Board
Perminder Singh	Sikh	Guru Nanak Dev University

Visitors/ senior participants:

Dr. Surjeet Kumar Singh	Buddhist	Mahatma Gandhi Uni. Wardha
Sukhbir Singh	Sikh	Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha UK

Opening Night, Saturday 27th November, 2010.

- Welcome by Mr Sukhbir Singh, (Guru Nanak Nishkam, UK), on behalf of the Nishkam International Centre and Bhai Sahib, Mohinder Singh; Sikh Welcoming Prayer, performed by local school children;
- Greetings and welcome from the Jathedar
- Greetings from Guru Nanak Dev University, Dr. Shashi Bala, Dean Dept of Religious Studies, Dr Balwant Dhillon, co-host of seminar.
- Opening remarks, Dr Alon Goshen-Gottstein, Executive Director, the Elijah Institute.
- Introductions of participants and sharing of stories, conducted by Peta Jones Pellach, Director of Educational Activities, the Elijah Institute. This activity involved mixing with other participants by random selection (use of birthdays as a factor) and introducing each other to the larger group.
- *Havdalah* ceremony – conducted by AGG – ceremonial ‘separation’ between the sacred and the profane, marking the start of the new week and a new venture.



Picture shows Alon Goshen-Gottstein, the Jathedar, Sukhbir Sing and Balwant Dhillon (at podium) at the opening ceremony.

Additional visitors in attendance: Shrivatsar Goswami, Bhikkhu Sanghasena

Participants' comments:

100% of respondents strongly agreed that the opening ceremony was appropriate and enjoyable and that the introductory exercises were a good way of meeting the group. They commented that it was nice to do something different.

Day 1 – Sunday 28th November, 2010.

Themes:

Introduction to the World of Dialogue; focus on Christianity.



Afternoon panel discussion: Alon Goshen-Gottstein, Shrivatsa Goswami, Bhikkhu Sanghasena, Balwant Dhillon

Program:

- Morning contemplation (led by Christian participants)
- Self-reflection – completion of questionnaire, to be revisited at end of seminar
- Leaders reflect on the place of dialogue in their religious lives – Shrivatsa Goswami, Bhikkhu Sanghasena, Fr John Chathanatt, Sukhbir Singh, Alon Goshen-Gottstein
- Introduction to World Religions and the world of interfaith dialogue – Powerpoint presentation with explanation and discussion.
- *Fundamentals of Christianity* – presented by Fr John Chathanatt
- Introduction to working with sources – basic guidelines and questions that need to be asked
- *Hostility to Hospitality* – Christianity unit – work in small groups followed by feedback session. Group work effective but feedback session less so.
- Panel of leaders – Shrivatsa Goswami (Hindu), Bhikkhu Sanghasena (Buddhist), Balwant Dhillon (Sikh)
- Skills development – ‘The Meaning of Real Dialogue’

Participants’ responses: Not enough time for introduction to World Religions; *Fundamentals of Christianity* ‘too theological’. Attention to skills valuable. Need for additional time to absorb large amounts of new information.

Comments: The *Hostility to Hospitality* units, which are the focus of our teaching, need substantial time for introduction and explanation. As a result of our experience at this seminar, we will be adding additional introductory materials and clarification questions.

Monday 29th November, 2010.

Themes:

The Dialogue Scene in India; Incorporating the Religious Leader into the Program; focus on Hinduism.



A morning contemplation session.

Program:

- Morning contemplation, led by Hindu participants
- Exercise and skills development – the Dialogue scene in India. This exercise involved participants taking a stand on a number of statements and defending their positions. It resulted in some fascinating discussions and revealed vast differences in the opinions of participants.
- Panel presentation (Shrivatsa Goswami and Father John Chathanatt) – How interfaith dialogue can benefit India. Fascinating insights. Responded to participants' views and added the perspective of leaders.
- *Fundamentals of Hinduism*, presented by Shrivatsa Goswami.
- *Hostility to Hospitality* – Hinduism unit – small groups followed by feedback to whole group. Feedback session revealed unevenness in groups and failure to grasp essence of effective summarizing. Future sessions were organized differently, with allocation to groups established on basis of strengths of participants and feedback similarly organized in balanced groups.
- Skills Exercise – non-verbal communication. This exercise involves a game in which participants choose a non-verbal sign for themselves and are required to remember their own and others'. It teaches observations skills.
- Skills Exercise – 'Nine Rules for Effective Dialogue' – reading and testing rules.

Participants' responses:

All activities were well-received. Ongoing concerns about the intensity of the seminar and amounts of new information.

A group discussion on the roof of the Nishkam International Centre.



Tuesday 30th November,

Themes:

Leadership Skills/ the skilled moderator; Focus on Islam

Program:

- Morning contemplation – led by Muslim participants
- *Fundamentals of Islam* - Presented by Professor Timothy Gianotti (by Skype video link)
- *Hostility to Hospitality* – Muslim unit – small groups followed by feedback groups
- Introduction to the use of case-studies and tool of role-play
- Visit to Guru Nanak Dev University – small group exercise with students, practicing dialogue moderation skills.



Some participants found the interaction with students a useful test of their skills but others believed they were not ready to lead the discussion as planned. All enjoyed the interaction and the challenge.

- Discussion on *Openness and Identity* led by Alon Goshen-Gottstein.
- Visits to places of worship – Catholic Church, Hindu Temple, Mosque.



‘It was particularly moving to see devout children at prayer.’

Visits to places of worship were a crucial part of the program, brought into focus and made meaningful by subsequent discussion and analysis.

Participants’ comments:

‘Prof Timothy did a nice job by highlighting that the spirituality is the essence of Islam. He was also very honest when he answered the question about women in Islam.’ Timothy Gianotti was acknowledged as an excellent teacher. Skype proved an invaluable tool.

Wednesday 1st December, 2010.

Themes:

Fundamentals of Sikhism; Reflection on places of worship and the role of prayer; introduction to the Elijah website.

Program:

- Contemplation – visit to Sikh school to observe children in prayer
- Visit to the Golden Temple, including presentation of ceremonial scarves, the Temple itself, introductory lecture, the *Langar* (provision of food to visitors), food preparation and stores, Temple grounds.



Clockwise from top left: Sikh participants assist a Christian to understand what he is seeing; in the food preparation area for the *Langar*; learning on the roof of the Temple; participants were presented with orange scarves by the Jathedar – a symbol of respect and welcome.

- Panel on the *Fundamentals of Sikhism* (Bhai Sahib, Mohinder Singh, Blawant Dhillon)
- Discussion on the places of worship and the role of prayer.
- Introduction to the Dialogue Decalogue (Swidler) and exercise in pairs preparing rules for good dialogue
- *Hostility to Hospitality* – Sikh unit – small groups followed by feedback groups
- Introduction to the Elijah Website

Participants' Feedback:

The Golden Temple and activities were a highlight of the program. The sessions analyzing worship and explaining successful dialogue were very useful.

Thursday 2nd November, 2010.

Themes:

The Elijah Method and educational philosophy; focus on Buddhism



'In the fishbowl' – participants engage in dialogue with each other while the larger group looks on.



Program:

- Contemplation led by Buddhist participants
- Exercise – 'In the Fishbowl' – leadership and dialogue skills
- The place of Elijah in the world of interfaith (continuation of Powerpoint presentation from day 1)
- Fundamentals of Buddhism – presented by Khandro Rinpoche by Skype video link
- *Hostility to Hospitality* – Buddhism unit – close reading of the essay
- The Elijah Method – close reading of the Methodological Guide
- The Elijah Method – compilation of 'tool-box' – various dialogue methods
- Encounter with Elijah scholars, member of the Elijah think-tank – by audio link. Participants: Timothy Gianotti, Maria Habito Reis, ..



Participants' comments:

Audio not as effective as video
– the encounter with scholars
would have been enhanced had
the technology been more
sophisticated. Discussion
fascinating but sometimes
difficult to maintain

Friday 3rd December, 2010.

Themes:

Taking the process home; focus on Judaism



Program:

- Morning contemplation, led by AGG
- Introduction to the Fundamentals of Judaism
- *Hostility to Hospitality* – Judaism unit – brief survey of issues
- Workshops on taking the process home – in regional groups, followed by feedback.
- Optional outing to border with Pakistan – in response to participants' request
- Closing dinner – *Shabbat* - traditional Jewish Friday night dinner

Participants' comments:

Workshops were very important

All participants expressed willingness to implement what they have learnt but many are not yet confident that they have enough knowledge to be good leaders. They are also concerned that their peers in India are similar to themselves – still in need of more learning. They have confidence in the Elijah professional staff and expect a lot of guidance and support from Jerusalem as they move forward in their roles as dialogue leaders.

The Friday night dinner was a popular activity to close the seminar.

[On this page I will be placing a lot more quotes – but waiting for more responses from participants.]

I enjoyed the seminar in Amritsar – the week was a positive experience for me, personally.

Comments: I would agree more than strongly. It was a wonderful experience both at personal and academic level