

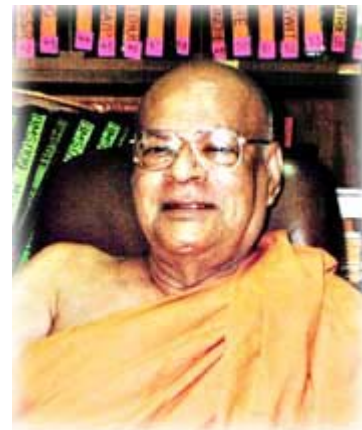
MCCBCHS (四大宗教咨询理事会)



Co-Existence and Collaboration in Malaysia

MCCBCHS is young but it was conceived several years before its format birth in 1983. Among its founder members, there were "giants" who worked tirelessly and selflessly to make MCCBCHS a council that would truly serve Malaysian society. These giants focused on founding an association of various religious leaders who would play an active part in creating peace in the country. They felt that unless there was such a group in our muftireligious, mufti-ethnic society, dedicated to creating and promoting peace, there would always be the possibility of painful conflicts and misunderstandings.

Like all young organizations and associations, there are naturally some rough edges which will take time and patience before they are eventually smoothed out. Like any such mixed group, selfappointed cliques of people who like to sit in judgment on the mistakes of its members are numerous. However, if you look closely, you might find people who are compassionate and understanding, who know human nature and knowing this, are always willing to make allowances for the occasional faux pas that will inadvertently be committed from time to time.



Recently, Harmoni spent a few hours listening to and talking with the Rev. Sri Dhammananda, one of the 'giants' who took part in bringing MCCBCHS to birth.

What are the challenges that MCCBCHS will encounter as we enter the new millennium? I asked the gentle and wise Rev. Dhammananda. He sat back in his office chair and pondered for a moment. "Today, we are better equipped to face the future. MCCBCHS has matured and has learnt from past mistakes", he said with a reassuring smile. At 80 years of age, the monk from Sri Lanka appeared hardly more than middle age. In spite of his recent multiple heart by-pass operation, the unassuming monk, in saffron robe, then quietly left me for a few minutes to make me a cup of his famous Ceylon tea. I felt touched by his simplicity.

Venerable Dharmamanda has assisted in many important conferences and meetings of Buddhist monks worldwide. "Mistakes are but the pillars of success," he said. To learn from our mistakes is to achieve success. Unless we experience failure and its bitterness, we will never appreciate the sweetness of victory said the wise 'Chief, as he is popularly known.

The 'Chief was perhaps referring to mistakes that were made in MCCBCHS during recent years.

"We must work, together to affirm human dignity, to create a new spiritual consciousness for all humanity, according to the different religious traditions. In this way, the principle of respect for freedom of religion and freedom of conscience may prevail," he said. "I am convinced that religious traditions have the necessary resources to overcome the problems that we have to face in the world. We must fulfil our obligation to live out the highest ideals of our religious traditions," the Buddhist leader, who has

authored at least 48 books on Buddhism, reflected.

He came to Malaysia from Sri Lanka in 1952 as a young monk and was the first Buddhist monk to reach out to the English-educated in the country.

"In MCCBCHS, we have had the opportunity during these years to come to know one another as 'family'. We are now able to work with one another without showing any superiority complex or hostility or discrimination towards one another. Muslims - for example, members of IKIM and ABIM - also invite us to their forums and seminars.

Our biggest problem today is the unacceptable behaviour of some of the members of the smaller groups of churches. The leaders of the Christian mainline churches work well with us. We all accept the freedom of individuals to convert to any religion they so desire but what is unacceptable is the disrespect and derogatory references made against other religions. This will generate anger and resentment,' he warned.

The 'Chief then went on to speak of the formula for coexistence and harmony not only in Malaysia but also elsewhere:

- Respect those who are worthy of respect; "Whenever you find truth, accept the truth even if it is not in your own holy books";
- Never refer to others as infidels or pagans or say that these people will go to hell;
- Never condemn or put labels on people of other religions. "The virtuous not only preach but live their beliefs."

The 'Chief then related his favourite story about his friend, Archbishop Soter Fernandez, when, as delegates of MCCBCHS, they paid a visit to a government minister. "When we arrived at the office, we both took our shoes off and placed them neatly at the entrance of the office as dictated by custom. Then we were told that the meeting was to be held in another room. Before I knew it, Archbishop Soter had rushed over to retrieve his shoes but he brought with him not only his own pair but also mine to the next room. I was touched." This, the 'Chief remarked, was truly a great act of humility.

Another incident that made a great impact on him was the care and respect shown to him by a priest. It happened in Sri Lanka some years ago but he never forgot the experience which remains etched in his memory. The 'Chief was on the way to a Buddhist temple and riding in the same bus was also a Catholic priest. It is the custom of Buddhist monks that the last meal of the day is eaten before noon. When it was already a quarter to 12 and the bus was not getting anywhere near his destination, the Catholic priest turned to the 'Chief and said, 'My church is just near here and since I am sure that you will never be able to reach your destination before 12 noon, I would like to invite you to get off the bus with me here. I shall be able to provide you with lunch and then take you to your destination after that."

The chief was deeply touched by the care and respect that the Catholic priest showed him and he readily accepted the invitation. Now this is the sort of behaviour that we all must show for one another, if we wish to

create peace and love in the world, Rev. Dhammananda explained.

Unfortunately, the human weaknesses of suspicion, fear and jealousy spoil the good name of religion, he said. We must all work together in the service of humankind. This is the noble purpose of life, he emphasized. The 'Chief' then quoted the Dalai lama: "When I meet another person, I meet another human being and I never think of race, colour or religion."

There is much hope when great persons like the 'Chief' continue to disseminate the unchanging values of compassion, respect and service to their followers. As long as such leaders of the MCCBCHS and others are actively living the highest ideals of their religious beliefs, there will be peace and harmony in our country.