

## Getting to the heart of peace-building

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It is significant that WACC's Congress 2008 in Cape Town has chosen 'Communication is Peace: Building Viable Communities' as the theme of its gathering. It is common to speak of 'Communication for Peace' or 'for Peace-Building'. But the bold assertion, 'Communication is Peace' is a welcome emphasis that gets to the heart of some of the deepest issues that plague our efforts at seeking, building, maintaining, and fostering peace.

Many peace efforts fail, or breakdown after a while because they are not built on mutual knowledge and understanding and an appreciation of the issues that have kept communities apart in a state of alienation.

One of the important revelations of the tragic events related to the September 11th attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon is how little the average citizen in the United States knew about Islam and the Muslims. Often, gaps created by lack of knowledge are readily filled by prejudices and assumptions, and the willingness to succumb to the fear of the unknown. Throughout history powerful groups in society exploit such ignorance to polarize communities and perpetuate violence and war. True knowledge is liberative; mutual understanding is at the heart of building communities that live in peace with justice.

Efforts at peace fail when parties to the conflict place pre-conditions for entering into dialogue or negotiations; they can make no progress if there is no channel of communication that enables people to bring all their grievances to the table; they have little hope of success if the persons in the dialogue are not good listeners to what others say and are not good communicators of their own concerns in ways that make sense to others.

My long and sustained involvement in Interfaith Dialogue has taught me that informed understanding between two communities — of what each of the communities believe and why, the commonalities and genuine differences they have, an appreciation of the common challenges they face as part of the one human community etc. — open a whole new chapter in their relationships. Not all differences are overcome, nor are any guarantees that major differences would not appear in the future.

But they have become a 'community of conversation' and a 'community of heart and mind' across the religious barrier. In other words, in relation to peace building in the world, they have become a viable community that has the necessary foundations to anticipate and prevent conflict, to manage conflict when it arises, and to build mechanisms for reconciliation and peace. Building such viable communities should certainly be at the heart of all efforts at peace building.

The listening and learning process that goes on in communication and the way such communication impacts and transforms the affective and relational dimensions of life in community are central to building viable communities for peace. Where there is no effective and creative communication, ignorance reigns, which is the cause of much of the conflict and violence of our day. It is no exaggeration to say 'Communication is Peace'. It is central to building viable communities that make and sustain peace.