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Ottawa*Watch172:* The bland leading the bland?

By Lloyd Mackey

One area that did not really come up for discussion in the event recounted here, was the role of colonialism/indigeneity. At that time, it was not a major issue, although there were signs that it might become so. Certainly, indigenous people from various parts of the world were a part of the discussion at Lausanne II, held in Manilla in 1989, where I attended as a journalist. The Lausanne conferences, held in 1974, 1989 and 2010, all recognized, increasingly, the issues raised by colonialism and the alleged ignoring of indigenous people on the part of Christian evangelizers.

Sometimes the business of tolerance and dialog, particularly when it passes between members of different great world religions, begins to sound like the "bland leading the bland."

That was the expression used earlier today on one of the list serves of which I am a member. A particular posting suggested that the person doing the writing had been doing much work for the educational system, where the objective was to write in a way that did not offend anyone.

Thus, the "bland" designation.

At the opposite end of the "bland" scale is the professional polemicist, whose task it is to offend as much as possible, his or her opponents, in the course of persuading in favour of one's own viewpoint. Webster defines polemics as "an aggressive attack on or refutation of the opinions or principles of another."

In the House of Commons the anger, both feigned and real, is often close to the surface. It makes for great theatre and it seems to be necessary to keep the politicians in the public eye.

But, beneath the surface, bland dialogue, cool tolerance, carefully-crafted conversations, conflict resolving and great attempts at trying to understand across substantial philosophical and religious divides are often the orders of the day.

And many Christians are involved in these processes. They face the challenge of making common cause with people who are religiously different, while at the same time bearing faithful witness to their allegiance to Christ and the gospel.

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All of which brings us to "Keeping the Faith: A Multi-Faith Dialogue on Spirituality and International Development in the Current Global Context."

That was the long and many-faceted title of a May 6-7 conference held in Ottawa, initiated by the Canadian Christian Relief and Development Association (CCRDA).

I wrote a news story for Christian*Week* which is to appear soon in both the national and Ontario editions of the newspaper. In this Ottawa*Watch*, I would like to engage in some analysis that will, hopefully, be helpful to Christians who must engage on a regular basis with people of other religions, as part of the work that they do.

Firstly, let's take a look at the conference's co-operating bodies. They were:

> Adventist Development and Relief Agency Canada, Cause Canada, Christian Children's Fund of Canada, Canadian Foodgrains Bank, Development and Peace, International Development and Relief Foundation (Muslim-based), Mennonite Central Committee Canada, The Primate's World Relief and Development Fund of the Anglican Church of Canada, World Hope International Canada and World Vision Canada.

Next, let's share a "typology" that was brought to the conference by Ray Vander Zaag, a professor at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg.

Vander Zaag describe the "landscape" in Canada by outlining a "typology" of faith-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – including missional, transformative, faith-based humanitarian and historical. Close to 60 per cent of Canadian faith-based agencies receiving government assistance are Christian-based, he noted.

He suggested continuity in the way the different organizations do their development work – capacity-building and multi-sector community development. That prevails despite differences in their spiritual objectives, ranging from spiritual conversion for missional groups to empowerment or the righting of injustice under other types.

In other words, despite different motivations among faith-based groups, with respect to accentuating the conversion impulse, they all have points in common.

That leads us to look at the outlined purpose of the conference and the contextual issues presented.

The outlined purpose was five-fold:

- To deepen understanding of the connection between faith and international development.
- To reflect and dialogue on the nature, role and value of faith-based relief and development organizations in Canadian civil society and development co-operation.
- To examine the challenges facing faith-based relief and development organizations in the current global context.

- To strengthen the ability of Canadian faith-based organizations to constructively connect faith with development process and engagement of the public.
- To provide opportunity to learn about the Canadian faith-based development community for and for this community to learn from each other.

Among the contextual issues:

- Canadian faith-based non-government organizations (NGOs), most but not all of them Christian, play an important part in relieving suffering and reducing poverty around the world.
- Several factors, the most visible being "the debate on the perceived rise of religion as a political and cultural dividing line," have renewed attention toward the role of faith and development.
- Spirituality and religious faith "are key elements of people's identity and ethical/cultural systems." Religious organizations and networks are important components of local, national and international civil society.

The conference sessions were topically divided into spirituality-development, gender, environment and peacebuilding. And the panellists were drawn from Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Baha'i, Hindu and Buddhist backgrounds.

After each of the panel presentation, attenders broke out into table groups with questions to guide discussion. Three such were:

What is understood or implied by "religious fundamentalism"? In what way does the use of such categories or constructs help or hinder attempts to understand and address the causes and results of violent conflict and build a stable foundation for peace?

What stories or particular texts within your faith inform your understanding and framework for implementing environmental programs?

How can the principles of non-discrimination in the provision of relief and development assistance be respected by faith-based agencies while maintaining their distinctive identities and beliefs?

We will wrap this summary with comments from three people, each with a differing perspective.

Avrum Rosenweig, founding director of Ve'ahavta: The Canadian Jewish Humanitarian and Relief Committee, spoke of his organization's goal of "Tikun olam (repairing the world) through the sharing of Jewish experience in community development."

Pierre Beemans, a 30-year international development veteran who capped his career with a six-year-research project on the interfacing of science, religion and development,

suggested that faith-based organizations are still seen as "marginal" in the minds of many development agency leaders.

Nevertheless, he encouraged faith-based groups not to underestimate the value of prayer as a significant factor in what they are doing – no matter what kind of flack they get from the "Richard Dawkins of the development world – and there are many." (Dawkins is a leading exponent of the virtues of atheism and the harmfulness of religion.)

"Every faith-based group uses secular language to define how they do development. But ontological needs are as basic as health, food and good government – and religion helps deal with (those) needs," he pointed out. (Ontological questions, he suggested, relate to "Why do good when it doesn't do any good?" and "What happens when we die?")

Development agencies that are not faith-based "don't have a framework … that has room for religion. (They recognize that faith-based groups have a religious/ontological approach) but it is 'their religion' not ours," he allowed.

Following the conference, Bev Carrick, chair of CCRDA and executive director of Cause Canada, told me the rationale for the conference is that "addressing global issues such as social injustice, environmental degradation and violent conflict is a worthy mandate supported by virtually all of the world's major religions."

She suggested that the conference initiated an important dialogue between Canadian faith-based organizations "where we shared best practices about peace building, environmental protection and gender balanced programming."

It was a good experience to be among the 70 people who were wrestling with these issues for the two days.

Bland or not, it is the sort of exercise Christian servants should engage in from time to time.

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