A Dialogical Peace Journey: Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka

Written by Dr. Amjad Mohamed-Saleem

Introduction

I have worked with Reverend Ebenezer Joseph, the immediate past president of the Methodist Church of Sri Lanka and the current president of the Interfaith Coalition for Peace Sri Lanka, over the last ten years. I am pleased to present this interview to motivate those who plan to work in this sector. On the surface, Rev. Ebenezer is a reticent, unassuming man, but spend some time with him, and you will understand the depth of his thinking and compassion.

The Turning Point: 1983

The Reverend's journey towards peace and interfaith leadership is rooted in his experience of the Sri Lankan conflict, particularly during the ethnic riots and pogrom of 1983, during which hundreds of thousands from the Sri Lankan ethnic minority group Tamil were killed and displaced, and the subsequent conflict that emanated from the pogrom. In a crucial moment in 1983 that shaped his future, the Reverend, along with others, found themselves trapped in a burning building (the Church which he was responsible for) and surrounded by a violent mob. Remarkably, their lives were spared due to the brave interventions of individuals from different faiths—a Buddhist caretaker, a Hindu priest, and a Muslim beggar.



Reverend Ebenezer Joseph

First, a Buddhist caretaker of the Church they were living in stood up to the mob trying to enter the burning building, affirming his religious values of the sacredness of life and risking his own life to protect others. Next, a Hindu priest provided shelter for the Reverend and other displaced Christians in his temple. Then, after the riots subsided, a Muslim beggar who sometimes slept on the porch of the Church and for whom the Reverend would occasionally bring tea, went from camp to camp to ensure the Reverend was safe and to offer him a simple act of kindness - a cup of tea.

These acts of humanity, carried out by individuals of different faiths and emerging from their shared sense of humanity, provided the Reverend with an alternative narrative to the violence surrounding him and profoundly impacted his life. Rather than succumbing to vengeance or perpetuating hatred, these events served as a source of inspiration and led him to dedicate himself to peacebuilding and fostering dialogue between faith communities.

His life story from these experiences exemplifies the complexity of peace as a process and a journey and highlights the vital role of interfaith collaboration and leadership in post-conflict environments.

Faith as the Foundation of Peace

Faith has been at the core of the Reverend's peacebuilding journey, serving as a guiding force and a source of strength in the face of adversity. His Christian faith, particularly the teachings of Christ about loving one's neighbor and forgiving one's enemies, has been instrumental in shaping his approach to peace. His Christian upbringing and deep theological education instilled in him the values of compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation, leading him to be open to working with leaders of other faiths and communities. The incidents of 1983 cemented the importance of these values and were instrumental in shaping his perspective on life and faith.

The Reverend emphasizes that true faith is not about theological or ritual practice. It transcends boundaries, finding its highest expression in acts of love, kindness, and solidarity. Thus, the Reverend's faith is not confined to narrow doctrines or exclusive belief systems. He believes that religious convictions should not oppose others' beliefs. It should embrace a broader sense of shared humanity, enabling collaboration across religious divides and fostering understanding, unity, and shared action towards the common good.

In addition, the Reverend also sees faith as a source of inner peace, a foundational aspect of his commitment to peacebuilding. According to the Reverend, inner peace is essential for anyone who wishes to engage meaningfully in reconciliation and conflict resolution. As the Reverand says "You can not have outer peace if you are not at peace within yourself". This inner peace, rooted in faith, has allowed him to remain steadfast in his work despite his many challenges.

Interfaith Collaboration and Trust

Interfaith relationships have been a central component of the Reverend's peacebuilding efforts, demonstrating that collaboration between religious traditions is possible and essential in post-conflict societies. His work with senior Buddhist monks and leaders

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from other faiths is a powerful example of how trust can be built between individuals of different religious backgrounds, even in contexts marked by deep divisions.

The Reverend's approach to interfaith collaboration is based on mutual respect and recognizing shared values rather than theological agreement. He recounts working closely with senior Buddhist monks whose perspectives may have initially been shaped by their religious and cultural contexts. However, they found common ground in their shared commitment to peace through consistent dialogue and developing personal relationships.



Rev Ebenezer speaking at a panel with the author in April 2024 at an event on faith and planetary health.

According to the Reverend, trust is not built through formal agreements or theoretical discussions but through developing personal relationships, acknowledging lived experiences, recognizing humanity in one another, and committing to a shared goal of peace. Over time, he and these religious leaders have developed a bond beyond doctrinal differences. This trust has allowed them to work together on projects that promoted peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka, creating a model of interfaith collaboration that could be replicated elsewhere and sustaining long-term collaborations.

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The Role of Storytelling

Central to the Reverend's approach to peacebuilding is the power of storytelling as a tool for personal and collective healing. He believes that sharing personal narratives can unlock the 'heartbeats' of people, and the deeper understanding and empathy among divided communities even in the midst of conflict. These heartbeats, as he describes them, represent the deep-seated desires for peace and understanding that often go unacknowledged amidst violent conflict. By tapping into these personal stories, the Reverend feels there is an opportunity to foster a more profound sense of empathy among people from different communities. This is what inspired him to set up the Interfaith Coalitions for Peace in Sri Lanka which undertakes a healing of memories project.

For the Reverend, storytelling is not just about recounting past events but about

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sharing the emotional and human experiences beneath the surface of conflict. By telling these stories, individuals can connect on a personal level, breaking down the barriers of prejudice and fear that often perpetuate violence. It starts with a humanization of the other, which is the first step in building relationships on the journey of trust building.

The Challenges of Peacebuilding

Despite the Reverend’s optimism, he acknowledges the significant challenges that remain. One of the greatest obstacles he identifies is the tendency for people to see peace as a quick fix or a project with a clear endpoint. In reality, he emphasizes that peace is not just about agreements made in formal settings or projects but about the relationships nurtured over time. He insists that peace is a long-term process that requires sustained effort, patience, and the willingness to engage with complex, deeply rooted issues—one that involves slow and steady progress rather than quick solutions.

While the civil war officially ended in Sri Lanka in 2009, it did not automatically resolve the divisions and animosities that had developed over decades of conflict, and deep-seated issues of division, mistrust, and hate still continue to simmer below the surface. The Reverend points out that, although there is no longer active warfare, the underlying social and political issues—such as ethnic divisions, economic disparities, and the lack of a shared national identity—remain unresolved. These unresolved tensions continue to pose a significant challenge to peacebuilding efforts.

The Reverend is also concerned that Sri Lanka has not yet developed a collective national consciousness, which he views as essential for building a united future. He believes that while individuals and communities may have made some progress in healing from the war, the nation as a whole has not yet fully come to terms with its past or developed a clear, united vision for the future. He suggests that collective reflection and grassroots dialogues, especially those addressing economic and social issues, are critical to fostering unity.



Rev Ebenezer speaking at a conference on local actors in humanitarian action in 2017 organized by the joint learning initiative on faith and communities.

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Future Vision: Youth and Community Integration

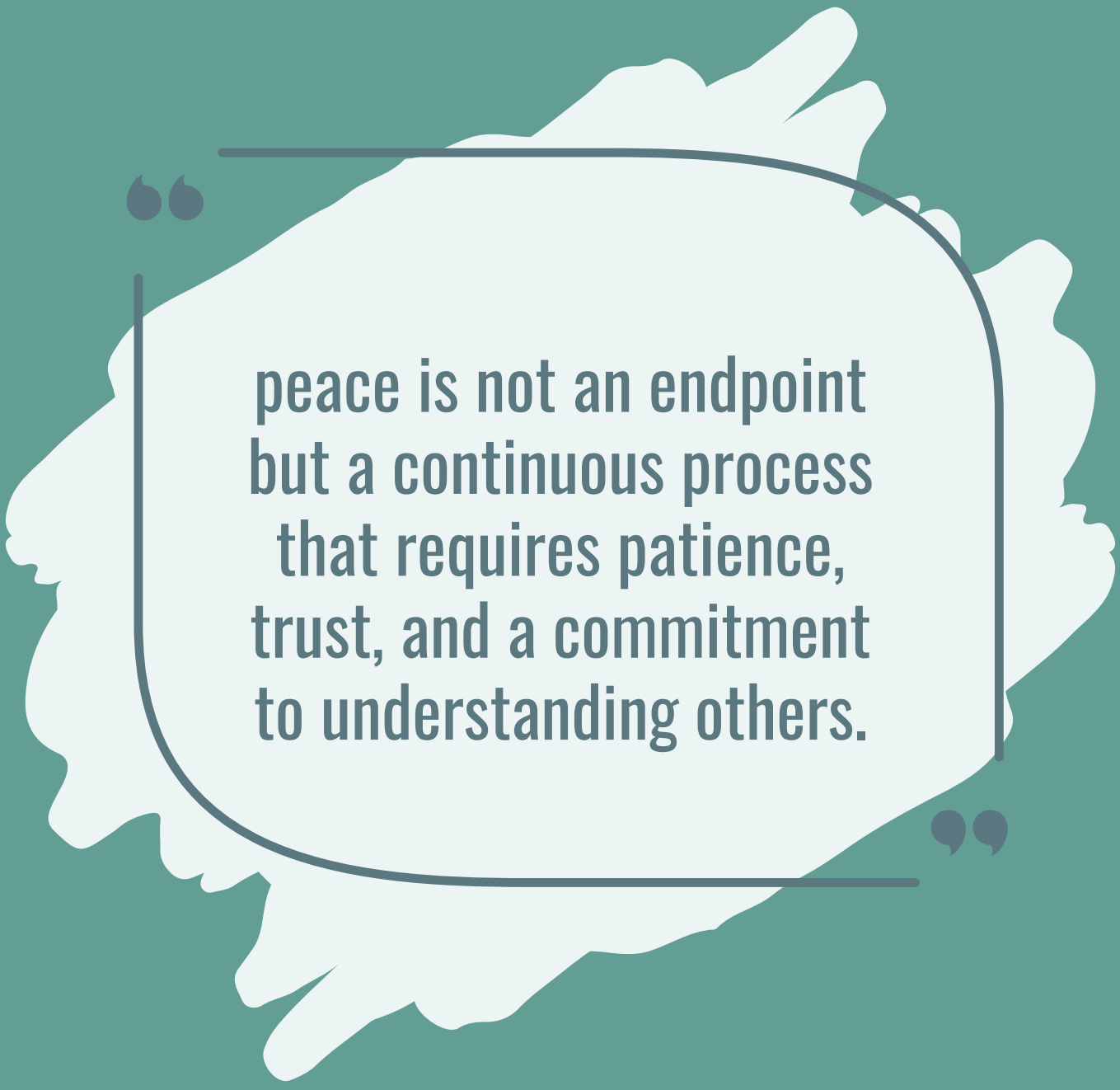
Looking ahead, the Reverend is focused on building a future that prioritizes the role of young people and community-level integration. He believes youth are key to sustaining peace in Sri Lanka and other post-conflict societies. However, he also recognizes that young people need to be equipped with the right tools, skills, and opportunities to become effective peacebuilders, investing in their leadership potential, and enabling them to create alternative spaces for dialogue and transformation. This involves a space for intergenerational learning and co-creation.

One of the Reverend’s current projects involves working with former militants and military personnel to promote community integration. This initiative is particularly significant because it brings together individuals who were once on opposite sides of the conflict to work collaboratively on rebuilding their communities. By engaging in joint efforts, such as community development and reconciliation programs, these individuals can transcend their past differences and contribute to a shared future.

These initiatives, he believes, provide a blueprint for reconciliation and healing in post-conflict societies.

Conclusion

The Reverend’s story is one of transformation, resilience, and hope. In 2022 he was awarded the World Methodist Peace Prize for his work in this space. In his true, humble self, he takes that with a pinch of salt. His journey demonstrates that peace is not an endpoint but a continuous process that requires patience, trust, and a commitment to understanding others. The Reverend has shown that peacebuilding is possible, even in the most challenging circumstances, by fostering interfaith collaboration and focusing on shared humanity. His work provides a model for others to follow, emphasizing that peace begins with personal relationships and is sustained by collective action.


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