

Conceptual Plan for House of Peace Ecumenical Centre (“HOPE Centre”)

Background

Sri Lanka is a nation rich in religious diversity. Among her population of approximately 18.5 million, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam are all practiced. Approximately 70 percent of the population is Buddhist, 15 percent Hindu, 8 percent Christian, and 7 percent Muslim.

Most members of the majority Sinhalese community are Theravada Buddhists. Almost all Muslims are Sunnis, with a small minority of Shi’a, including members of the Borah community. Roman Catholics account for almost 90 percent of the Christians; Protestants make up the remaining 10 percent.

Most of the population in the north and east is Hindu with Buddhism overwhelmingly present in the south and west. And, while there are some small concentrations of Christians in the west and Muslims in the east, there are many parts of the country that contain a broader mixture of religions. Trincomalee is one such place. The Trincomalee District contains roughly equal proportions of Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims and a smaller concentration of Christians.

Most analysts who have studied the 20-plus-year civil war in Sri Lanka have concluded that, although religious differences play some role in the conflict, its origins are complex and stem more from ethnic as opposed to religious diversity. Nonetheless, “faith-based violence” and “religious hate crime” are on the rise, and on more than a few occasions the Sri Lankan government has given serious consideration to legislation prohibiting the “unethical conversion” of people from other religions. Such legislation appears to be favored by a strong coalition of both Buddhists and Hindus (and even by some Muslims and Christians). One could, therefore, argue that tensions stemming from religious differences are playing a greater role in the conflict today than they did in times past.

But regardless of how significant a factor religious diversity plays in the war, any solution to the national crisis and armed conflict will depend upon the ability of the parties to articulate a vision of a democratic pluralist social order, within which political and other institutions are entrenched that respect the fundamental equality of all the national and ethnic identities and religious traditions, and that provide them with dignity and justice as equal and integral partners of the state.

VeAhavta’s Role in Fostering Peace

The directors of VeAhavta – and of course our overseas representatives – are well aware of the religious diversity that exists in Sri Lanka, in Trincomalee and, more importantly, at the Grace Care Centre; and we are all determined not to allow religious differences to devolve into religious bigotry. We are also desirous of

fostering peaceful dialog among people of different religions in the Trincomalee area. Therefore, the directors of VeAhavta have resolved to construct a new and unique facility at the Grace Care Centre to be named the “House Of Peace Ecumenical Centre” or “HOPE Centre” for short.

Through HOPE Centre, VeAhavta will help foster respectful interfaith dialog, will allow instruction in each of the major religions in Sri Lanka, and will assure that the residents of the Grace Care Centre may worship in the manner and traditions of their own choosing without fear of being stigmatized.

VeAhavta will invite a respected local cleric from each of the four major religions to adorn a room within HOPE Centre (to be referred to as a “resource room” or “prayer room”) in the manner of his or her choosing, to provide religious instruction within that prayer room to the Grace Care Centre residents, and to use the open-air “common area” of HOPE Centre, which will remain free of all religious ornaments and/or symbols, for larger educational and interfaith gatherings and meetings. Conceptually, the HOPE Centre facility will look something like what is depicted below in *Figure 1*.

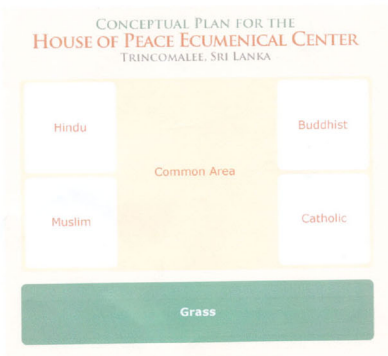


Figure 1: HOPE Centre Conceptual Building Plan

Our aspiration is that HOPE Centre will serve as a model for religious harmony in Sri Lanka and that it will, in some small way, contribute to the establishment of peace on the island. With the help of some very dedicated, peace-loving individuals, the Grace Care Centre will be a place of religious freedom, a place where the adherents of each religion can peacefully co-exist and yet also preserve their own unique traditions and identities.

One vitally important key to the success of HOPE Centre will be the religious leaders or clerics selected to staff the facility; therefore, a brief discussion of the qualifications for clerics is appropriate at this stage in the development of HOPE Centre. In this regard, the following three issues are of critical importance:

1. Each cleric must be truly committed to interfaith dialog and must agree that respectful integration is the key to establishing peace in Sri Lanka. He/she must be confident enough in their faith that they do not feel threatened by people of other faiths; they must not have a conversion agenda; and they must not have a goal to merge the different faiths into one new “conglomerate religion.” In other words, he/she must be able to get along well with others, and must honestly respect religious differences. He/she must look for common ground, but must not pretend that differences do not exist or attempt to conflate the different religions into a “melting pot” of sorts.

2. Each cleric must be thoroughly knowledgeable of his/her faith and must be able to articulate that faith clearly and respectfully. The first impression is critically important, and children in particular should be presented with a positive view of each faith as a foundation for respect. If someone with little knowledge of his/her faith is selected, it will reflect poorly on that particular faith and on what VeAhavta is trying to accomplish and will, therefore, undermine our efforts.

3. Finally, the cleric must be firmly supported by his/her local faith community. The strides we make toward respectful interfaith dialog and peaceful interfaith coexistence must involve more than just one person (i.e., one cleric); it must also involve each faith community as much as possible. The local faith community must screen, support and, when necessary, discipline the cleric. It will not be acceptable to have a person of another faith perform these functions; it must come from the local faith community. While VeAhavta, with the assistance of all of the clerics, will exert control over the administrative aspects of HOPE Centre, the substantive aspects of HOPE Centre (e.g., worship, teaching, discipline of clerics, etc.) must be left completely in the care of each individual faith community. Hindus, for example, must be “in charge” of the Hindu cleric; Muslims “in charge” of the Muslim cleric, etc.

Before proceeding with the physical development of HOPE Centre, VeAhavta will initially request that leaders from the different faith communities in Trincomalee approve of this conceptual plan in writing. Approvals must come from faith leaders within the community – those people being the highest level administrative authority within the community (e.g., a bishop). Once preliminary approval has been obtained, VeAhavta will proceed to construct HOPE Centre and will thereafter seek the participation of local clerics in the development of bylaws to govern the administration of the facility.

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Buddhist Approval of HOPE Centre Conceptual Plan

On behalf of the Buddhist Community in Trincomalee, I hereby approve the foregoing "Conceptual Plan for House of Peace Interfaith Centre ('HOPE Centre')." The Buddhist Community will offer its good faith support of said plan and is in favor of the plan as a means of restoring interfaith harmony and peace in Sri Lanka.

Dated: January 20, 2007

Sri Bodipada Paramaya
Gamunu Pura, Kandy Road, Trincomalee



By: Rev. K. Pangnatissa

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