

Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Mindanao

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For Muslims as well as the Indigenous Peoples or *Lumads* Mindanao has been their homeland. For Christians who migrated from the Visayas and Luzon, Mindanao has been the “promised land.” Too often, Mindanao has turned into a “no-man’s land.” Through many years, the armed conflict in Mindanao has claimed the lives of over 100,000 people – Muslims and Christians, civilians and combatants. Although not a religious war, this conflict has pitted many Christians and Muslims against each other. Others have learned to peacefully co-exist while many hold mutual prejudices and mistrust. One of the signs of hope is the dialogue that is being carried out between Christians and Muslims at various levels. In this article I intend to provide an overview of the Mindanao context, then share my personal experience of dialogue before discussing the various levels and forms of dialogue.

1. The Mindanao Context: An Overview²

Mindanao is located in the Southern part of the Philippines. It is close to Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei.

Muslims comprise 5% of the total population of the Philippines and 19 percent of the population of Mindanao. Most of them live in Central and Western Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago. They make up the majority in 5 provinces: Lanao del Sur (91.5%), Maguindanao (63.7 %), Basilan (70.4%), Tawi-Tawi (95.7 %), Sulu (98.9%) They are also present in most of the major towns and cities in Mindanao such as Davao, Cotabato and Cagayan de Oro. The Indigenous Peoples or *Lumad* make up less than 10 percent. Christians comprise over 70 percent of the population. Roman Catholics make up 65 percent.

The *Lumads* were the original inhabitants of Mindanao. By the 16th century the Islamization of Mindanao was underway. Among the tribal peoples that were converted to Islam were the Maguindanaos, Maranaos, Tausogs, Samas, Kalagan and Iranuns. By the end of the Spanish era, the Muslims comprised the majority – over 76 % of the population, mostly in Central and Western

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² The main source for the historical perspective: William Larousse, *Walking Together Seeking Peace: The Local Church of Mindanao-Sulu Journeying in Dialogue with the Muslim Community (1965-2000)* (Claretian Publications: Quezon City, 2001).

Mindanao. The *Lumads* occupied the upland areas while Christian communities were found mostly in coastal areas of Northern and Eastern Mindanao. The Spanish Conquistadores failed to fully subjugate the *Lumad* and the Muslims. The Muslim sultanates of Maguindanao and Sulu were able to put up a strong resistance.

During the American era and the post-war era, landless Christian settlers from Luzon and Visayas migrated to Mindanao. Mindanao was regarded as the Land of Promise. In less than a century, Christians comprised the majority. By then, the Muslim sultanates had been weakened and placed under American control and later formed part of the Newly Independent Philippine Republic in 1946.

Christian-Muslim relations since the Spanish era have often been tense and antagonistic. The Spanish colonizers & missionaries regarded the Muslims as their nemesis. This view was influenced by the historic struggle against the Muslim moors who occupied Spain for many centuries. In many morality plays called “Moro-moro” which were introduced by the missionaries, the Muslims were portrayed as the villains. The attacks carried out by Muslim raiders on Christian settlements in Mindanao and Visayas deepened the animosity.

With the influx of Christians in Mindanao during the American period and under the new Republic, the Muslims and *Lumads* felt that they were being deprived of their ancestral land. The Christian settlers who were able to acquire title on the land they were tilling thought that they had a right to live in Mindanao. This was the source of conflict and animosity. An uneasy coexistence prevailed among Muslims and Christians during and after World War II. In 1968, Muslim recruits who were secretly trained for clandestine operation in Sabah were killed by their officers. The Jabidah massacre angered the Muslims in Mindanao and neighboring countries. As a consequence some Muslim leaders formed the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM). Fearful that they would be driven out of Mindanao, a Christian armed group named “Ilaga” rapidly spread. Meanwhile, Muslim armed group called “Baracuda” or “Blackshirts” were also being formed. Soon there were armed encounters between these two groups. The Ilagas would attack Muslim communities. The Baracudas would also attack Christian communities. The cycle of violence escalated.

In 1972, President Marcos declared Martial Law and he cited the “Muslim Rebellion” as one of the reasons for this, besides the Communist Insurgency. By 1974, the newly-formed Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) engaged the Government forces in heavy fighting. The Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), which supported the MNLF pressured the Government to negotiate with the MNLF. The OIC had become very powerful since most of the member countries were part of OPEC. Fearful of an oil boycott, Marcos gave in to the pressure and struck a peace deal with the MNLF in Libya in 1976. The “Tripoli

Peace Agreement” granted autonomy to Muslims in 13 out of 22 provinces. But this was to be ratified through a plebiscite among the residents in these provinces. The agreement was not fully implemented. Some of the provinces and cities voted against membership in the autonomous region. Marcos created a Muslim region that was smaller in area and not fully autonomous. Thus, the MNLF continued the armed struggle. However, there were divisions within its ranks. In 1984, a splinter group emerged – the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

After Marcos was deposed by People Power in 1986, the new government under President Corazon Aquino started a peace negotiation with the MNLF. A ceasefire was declared. The final peace agreement between the Government & MNLF was signed in 1996 during the administration of President Fidel Ramos. The Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) became a reality. The Government also immediately started peace negotiation with the MILF and a ceasefire was declared.

In 2000, President Estrada, declared an all-out war after the MILF attacked a town in Lanao. Peace negotiations were stopped and the Government forces attacked MILF camps all over central Mindanao. After Estrada was ousted by People Power in 2001, the new President Gloria Arroyo resumed the peace process with the MILE. A ceasefire agreement was reached and the peace negotiations dragged on for several years. There was relative calm in Mindanao, except in Basilan and Sulu where military operations were carried out against the Abu Sayaf. In 2003 military operations were also launched against armed groups in Central Mindanao which the Government accused of “kidnap-for-ransom.” By 2004, negotiations were resumed. International Monitor Teams composed of Malaysians were set up with the assistance of local NGOs to make sure the ceasefire agreement was observed.

In August 2008, the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) was about to be signed. But the Supreme Court handed down a Temporary Restraining Order due to the petitions of politicians and groups opposed to the deal. These groups were alarmed that the deal would lead giving up territory to the Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE) and to the creation of an independent Islamic state in Mindanao. The deal would require changes in the constitution in order to create a Federal Form of Government. A month later, after an attack by MILF units on several towns, President Arroyo withdrew from the peace process. In October 13, the Supreme Court came out with a ruling declaring the MOA-AD unconstitutional.

Meanwhile, the armed conflict between the Government forces and some MILF units has once again escalated. The ILAGA – the Christian armed groups have resurfaced. Tension between Christians and Muslims is once again building up.

2. My personal experience of Christian-Muslim Dialogue

I cannot write about Christian-Muslim dialogue in Mindanao without starting from my own experience. I am an active participant in this process and my experience influences how I approach the topic. Out of my own experience, I can deduce the nature and form of this dialogue.

My grandparents were one of the first wave of settlers that migrated to Mindanao during the early decades of the 20th century. My father was born in Marawi, a predominantly Muslim city in Lanao del Sur. My father's sister married a Muslim datu and I have Muslim cousins. Some of my cousins who are Christians also married Muslims. In a way, Christian-Muslim dialogue started when I was young – among my relatives. I grew up in Iligan City and as a young boy I accompanied my father, a civil engineer, who was building bridges in the Muslim area in Lanao.

Although I studied Islam in the seminary under Fr. Thomas Michel in the late 1970s, my deep interest in Christian-Muslim dialogue actually began in 1999. I was asked by Msgr. Desmond Hartford to be the resource person for the pastoral assembly of the Prelature of Marawi. The topic I was asked to talk about was: “Christian-Muslim Dialogue of Life & Faith: The Role of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs)”³ Inspired by its first bishop – Benny Tuidud -- the Prelature of Marawi had adopted the pastoral thrust of engaging in Christian-Muslim Dialogue. This meant that dialogue was not just to be among religious leaders, but also among members of the small Christian communities and the Muslim communities at the grassroots level. To be able to assist BECs in this I did some personal study and research on Islam and on inter-religious dialogue.

In 2001, at the height of the all-out war between the Government forces and the MILF, Archbishop Fernando Capalla (the archbishop of Davao and a convenor of the Bishops-Ulama Conference) asked me to be part of the core group that would organize the Peace Caravan from Davao to Cotabato. The group was composed of two other priests and our Muslim counterparts – including Ustadz Mahmud Adilao (the head of the Ulama League of the Philippines – Southern Mindanao chapter). We were able to mobilize over two thousand Christians and Muslims riding on buses and trucks journeying across the war torn areas of central Mindanao. Upon arriving in Cotabato, we set up a peace camp. That night, Christians and Muslims gathered together to pray and listen to the Bible and the Qur'an. The following day, we marched to the hotel where the negotiating panels were meeting and delivered our appeal for ceasefire and to come up with a peace agreement. On our way back to Davao, we went through the area where there was heavy fighting between the MILF and Government troops. As we passed, the fighting stopped and we were

³ Amado Picardal, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue of Life and Faith: The Role of Basic Ecclesial Communities* <http://becsphil.tripod.com/refl-dialog.htm>

able to reach Davao safely.

The Caravan for Peace which we called the “Panaw sa Kalinaw” (Journey for Peace) became a symbol Christian-Muslim dialogue. A bond of friendship was forged among Christians and Muslims as we journeyed together, shared our food, prayed together and marched together for peace. Afterwards, we continued to organize marches and prayer rallies for peace in Davao which were attended by Christians and Muslims. We also started celebrating the Mindanao Week of Peace annually in Davao. The activities of the Mindanao Week of Peace brought together Muslims, Lumads and Christians from various denominations. There were prayer rallies, forum, symposium, youth peace camp, Church & Mosque visitation, etc.

During the Mindanao Week of Peace, I also organized the Bike for Peace. During the first bike for peace in Central Mindanao in 2002, we visited the Nalapaan Space for Peace in Pikit, Cotabato. We were welcomed by the Muslims and Christians living in the peace zone. This used to be an area where MILF and Government forces clashed. The parish priest, Fr. Bert Layson together with NGOs, had encouraged the Muslims, Christians and Lumads living in the area to declare it a peace zone. They negotiated with the MILF and the Government forces to respect their declaration. Since its setting up then there has been no more armed clashes in the area. Later, 40 other peace zones called “sanctuaries for peace” were set up in nearby areas.

In 2002, I participated in an annual summer seminar-workshop on Christian-Muslim Dialogue organized by Silsilah Dialogue Movement. This was held in Zamboanga City and lasted for a week. There were 25 Muslims and 25 Christians who lived together for a week at the Harmony Village. We shared our experiences on Christian-Muslim dialogue. We also explored each other’s respective faith – looking for the common ground while recognizing and respecting our differences. Muslim scholars talked about the basic tenets of Islam while Christian scholars explained the basic teachings of Christianity. Living together for a week also developed a bond of friendship among us. Since then, I have become part of the Silsilah Dialogue movement. I attended gatherings of the Silsilah Davao-Chapter. One of the most memorable experience was the visit we made to a mosque in a community in Panacan whose imam – Eldio - is also a member of Silsilah. We joined the Muslim community during the Friday noon-day prayer and after the imam spoke, he also asked me to address the community. It was indeed unusual that a priest was welcomed in a mosque and allowed to speak to the Muslim worshippers. After that we had a meal together at the imam’s house. The imam and members of his community have attended interfaith meetings in the parish of Panacan. They have also joined prayer rallies for peace that I have helped organized in Davao.

I have attended several gatherings of the Imam- Pastors-Priests Forum

(IPPF). We often discussed our common concerns—especially how Christians and Muslims can live in harmony and peace. On one occasion, we had a fellowship meal in the parish of St. Mary during the fiesta celebration of the parish. It reminded me that Mary is also held with high respect by Muslims.

During the Month of Ramadan this year, I fasted for peace and in solidarity with the Muslims in Mindanao. I joined Ustadz Adilao and his family in celebrating the Eid'l Ftr – the end of the fast.

During the month of September this year, after the MILF attacks in Lanao del Norte, I also participated in the bike for peace and caravan for peace from Iligan to Kolambugan which were organized by the Mindanao People's Caucus and the Civil Society Groups of Lanao. Christians and Muslims participated in this event. When we arrived in Kolambugan a Peace Forum was held which was attended by people led by their mayor.

With the breakdown of the peace process, I continue to be involved in Christian-Muslim Dialogue and in peace advocacy.

Reflecting on my own experience, I observe that Christian-Muslim dialogue is taking place at different levels:

1. at the grassroots level – among Christians and Muslims living in the same neighborhoods and communities.
2. within movements and groups composed of Christians and Muslims (such as Silsilah)
3. among religious leaders (Bishops-Ulama Conference, Imam-Priests-Pastors Forum)

This dialogue takes on various forms:

1. Dialogue of life
2. Dialogue of action for peace and development
3. Dialogue of prayer & celebration
4. Dialogue of faith and creed

The dominant form is the dialogue of action – the work for peace and development which has become the setting for dialogue of life, prayer and faith. I will delve more deeply into these levels and forms of dialogue in the following section of this paper.

3. Dialogue at the Grassroots

Dialogue has been taking place not just among religious leaders and scholars but among ordinary people at the grassroots level - in neighborhoods and communities. Schools have also become venues for dialogue. A book on case studies of 8 local communities in Mindanao involved in dialogue was

published in 2002.⁴ In most of the cases these were initiated by local leaders and participated by the members of the communities. Some were encouraged and supported by the clergy (parish priests or bishops), by nuns and lay pastoral workers. They often emerged as a response to tension or conflict between Christians and Muslims. In some cases the lumads (IPs) were also involved as 3rd parties. What follows is a summary of 3 case studies: Maladeg, Miryamville & Balabagan.

3.1 Maladeg⁵

The earliest efforts at Christian-Muslim dialogue at the grassroots took place in Maladeg, Sultan Gumander, Lanao del Sur. Maladeg is a predominantly Muslim village with Christians comprising 10 percent of the population. The main problem faced by the village and neighboring barrios was the Rido - the cycle of violence or vendetta killings between feuding families and clans. At times there was Rido between a Muslim clan and another Muslim clan. At other times Christian families were involved. Bob Anton was one of the Christians involved in the Rido. His family was perpetually at war with other Muslim families. Some members of his family had been killed and he in turn had to retaliate. After years of fighting he was fed up with the cycle of violence. In 1978, encouraged by Bishop Benny Tuftud, Bob Anton started dialogue with other Muslim leaders in the village. He was able to reconcile with his enemies. Together with the local Muslim leaders they set up a mechanism for mediating and settling conflicts. After so many years they were able to break the cycle of violence and learned to live as good neighbors and friends. In 1998, the peace zone expanded to the neighboring barrios. The leaders put into writing the unwritten agreements which was entitled "Covenant of Peace and Development."

During a discussion on the Maladeg, the factors that sustain the peace zone were pointed out:

Community members conduct frequent consultations, hold educational seminars and help mobilize local people's organizations in support of peace. Cooperative efforts between Muslims and Christians also reinforce peace-building and economic development activities in the region. Other key trainings address agricultural issues, environmental awareness and capacity building among community members. Residents have also compiled their experiences and other ZOP [Zone of Peace] resource materials in a reference manual which helps guide the community's peace-related activities. Ultimately, self-control and blood compacts between Maladeg residents buttress these formal activities,

⁴ Karl Gaspar et al., *Mapagpakamalinawon: A Reader for the Mindanawon Peace Advocate* (AF-RIM & CRS: Davao City, 2002).

⁵ Gaspar et al., 87-101.

providing them with the community support necessary for successful implementation. Monitoring committees also oversee all efforts.⁶

3.2 Miryamville⁷

Miryamville is a housing project in Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao made up of 249 households (159 Christians, 90 Muslims). The housing project was established in 1987 with the help of the Archdiocese of Cotabato-Reconciliation Center for the victims of the armed conflict. Immediately after the establishment of Miryamville, the residents came together and formulated the community vision-mission-goal (VMG) under the guidance of the staff of the Reconciliation Center.

Vision: A God-fearing, peaceful and progressive community where residents - Muslims and Christians – live harmoniously and respect each other's culture and traditions to attain total human development and transformation.

Mission: To build and promote the culture of peace in the community, develop good human values, cultivate the values of love, respect and forgiveness, recognize the essence of interdependence, and promote environment-friendly and gender-sensitive development.

Goals:

1. *To promote and sustain existing livelihood programs and to provide employment to qualified Muslim and Christian members of the community*
2. *To promote the protection of basic human and children's rights*
3. *To promote and sustain linkages with other development NGOs, POs [People's Organizations] and other organizations*
4. *To promote and sustain spiritual nourishment for both Muslims and Christians*
5. *To promote and protect women's rights*
6. *To promote the dialogue of life*
7. *To promote and ensure a peaceful and impartial settlement of conflicts in the community*

This VMG statement is written in a large board and placed prominently outside the community cooperative store as a reminder for the members of what they are trying to achieve among them. The leadership of the community is shared between Christians and Muslims. There are also three committees

⁶ *Reflections on Creating and Sustaining Zones of Peace: Lessons from Mindanao, Philippines*, Aug 7-9, 2003, Camp Alano Davao City, 17. www.mindanaopeaceweaver.org/pdf/zones-of-peace-ag-ong.pdf

⁷ Gaspar et al., 188-298.

made up of Christians and Muslims: The Peace and Order Committee, Program and Services Committee, Worship Committee.

The Peace and Order Committee is responsible for mediating and settling conflicts within the community.

The Program and Services Committee is responsible for responding to the socio-economic needs of the community. The committee has set up the following services: primary health care, educational facilities, loan scheme, and other self-help activities. A bakery and cooperative store have also been put up. Christians and Muslims work as a team in these projects.

The Worship Committee is responsible for the promotion of interreligious dialogue. During Muslim festivities like Ramadhan, the Muslim religious leaders explain to the Christians their significance. During Christian feasts like the patronal fiesta and Christmas, the Christians explain to the Muslims their meaning. They invite each other to their celebrations. The Christians and Muslims usually begin their gathering by praying together.

The community has set up the Miryamville Child Peace Learning Center. The center inculcates among young Christians and Muslims the culture of peace and interfaith dialogue. The children grow up together as friends, appreciating and respecting each other's culture and religion.

Miryamville is another sign of hope that it is possible for Christians and Muslims to live together in peace and harmony as a community.

3.3 Balabagan⁸

Balabagan is a town in Lanao del Sur with a predominantly Muslim population (80 per cent). Christians make up the remaining 20 per cent. As a response to the conflict and hostilities in the 1970s, the prelature of St. Mary in Marawi under the leadership of Bishop Bienvenido Tudtud promoted the Dialogue of Life and Faith program. Balabagan was one of the areas that implemented this program in the 1980s. The parish adopted the following objectives:

1. *To understand the roots of the Muslim-Christian animosity*
2. *To reflect on the each other's culture and faith and to celebrate the things that Christians and Muslims share in common*
3. *To facilitate the process of healing and reconciliation between Muslims and Christians*

It took a while for the people to accept this program due to mutual suspicion and mistrust among Christians and Muslims in Balabagan. Gradually it gained acceptance, especially among the young people. In 1985, the Balabagan Youth Muslim-Christian Organization (BYMCO) was established. Its objectives

⁸ Gaspar et al., 122-134.

were:

1. *To establish linkages between Muslim and Christian youth through sharing of experiences*
2. *To develop spiritual, mental and physical growth among youth*
3. *Facilitate activities that enhance their skills and promote integrations and cooperation*
4. *Promote conscientization and youth awareness of social issues*

Dialogue among young people was complemented by a program of dialogue initiated at the San Isidro High School. Although the school was run by the parish, the student population was made up of Christians and Muslims.

The school adopted an approach to dialogue that was more participatory, innovative and creative and which involved not only the students but also the teachers and the parents.

The dialogue that took place among young people and in the school has made a major impact on the whole community and town in Balabagan.

The Balabagan experience is an example of how young people and schools are involved in the Christian-Muslim dialogue. The prejudices and animosity are lessened when young people develop a bond of friendship and learn to respect each other. This has been happening not only in Balabagan but in many places in Mindanao. Commenting on the role of schools in Christian-Muslim dialogue, LaRousse writes: *“These schools offered a Christian presence and witness among the Muslim communities while at the same time responding to the need for education of both Muslims and Christians. The faculty of the schools included both Muslims and Christians. On a daily basis, the schools brought together the Muslim and Christian students.”*⁹

4. Dialogue Movements and Groups

There are movements and groups composed of Christians and Muslims that have emerged in Mindanao. Some of them are local or provincial in scope, others have spread throughout Mindanao.

Among these local movements are the Lanao Muslim-Christian Movement for Dialogue and Peace. The movement was formed in 1994 through the efforts of Aleem Elias Macarandang of Marawi, Msgr. Desmond Hartford of the prelatry of St. Mary in Marawi, Bishop Fernando Capalla the then Bishop of Iligan. The group would later influence the formation of the Bishops-Ulama Conference.¹⁰

Another local movement which emerged in Pagadian is the Interfaith Forum for Solidarity and Peace which was formed in 1996. The convenors

⁹ Larousse, 354.

¹⁰ Larousse, 389.

were Bishop Zacharias Jimenez and Aleem Dinas Dimataling. The group is composed of priests, pastors, ulama, lumad leaders, Christian lay people and ordinary Muslims. LaRousse describes the monthly gathering of the group: *“The forum begins with a prayer, then a sharing of faith experiences. This is a priority at the meeting so that all of the members can be enriched by the faith of others. Then there is a sharing on a particular topic by choosing a topic of common action... This is followed by a meal and time for fellowship, organized games or other activities, to promote deeper acquaintances and friendships among the participants of the forum.”*¹¹

Some of the members of the Interfaith Forum have formed local versions in the parishes – such as the one in Dinas.

4.1 Silsilah¹²

Silsilah is a movement composed of Christians and Muslims that is spreading throughout Mindanao. This was formed in Zamboanga in 1984 by Fr. Sebastiano d’Ambra and other collaborators. Silsilah is an Arabic word which means “chain” or “link.” This is the vision-mission of Silsilah:

In the name of God, the fountain and source of dialogue, Silsilah envisions a life-in-dialogue for all Muslims, Christians, and peoples of other living faiths in respect, trust and love for one another, and moving together towards a common experience of harmony solidarity and peace.

As instruments of dialogue and peace, we, the members of Silsilah commit ourselves:

1. *To live the essence of our respective faiths and bear witness to the values of our own religious traditions;*
2. *To be in dialogue with all peoples, regardless of culture and faith, promoting a Culture of Dialogue with particular emphasis on spiritual values; and*
3. *To be in solidarity with all peoples in the uplift of the less privileged, in the building of a progressive, just, humane and ecologically sound society.*

The center of Silsilah is in the Harmony Village which was established in 1990. In this twelve-hectare complex, there is a formation center called the Oasis of Dialogue. There is also a mosque and a chapel. The Silsilah Dialogue Institute was built in 1999 which has a spacious library and classrooms.

Since 1986, Silsilah has offered the Summer Course on Muslim-Christian Dialogue. There is a three-week basic course and a one-week intensive course.

¹¹ Ibid., 390.

¹² Data on Silsilah: personal knowledge and also from its website: www.silsilahforum.org

The following are the topics covered:

1. Basic teachings of Islam/ the Qur'an
2. Basic teachings of Christianity/ the Bible
3. Interreligious Dialogue, Culture of Dialogue

The participants also undergo immersion in Muslim communities as well as Christian communities. The resource persons are Islamic and Christian scholars. The participants are Muslims and Christians from all walks of life – priests, imams, pastors, nuns, seminarians, lay leaders, pastoral workers, teachers, students, youth, NGO workers, etc. Majority comes from Mindanao but there are also others from Luzon and the Visayas. During the summer course, the participants live together, eat together, pray together, study together, and share their experiences. This environment helps to form the bond of lasting friendship.

In recent times, Silsilah summer courses have also been conducted in Davao, Cagayan de Oro and Manila. The Silsilah summer courses have thousands of alumni who became part of the movement and many of them have established local chapters of Silsilah in major cities in Mindanao.

The promotion of dialogue and Peace among the youth has always been one of the priorities of Silsilah. As a result of this special attention, the SilPeace groups was organized in 1999 with the following objectives:

1. *To live a positive experience of friendship and relationship where the differences of cultures and religions become a way of rediscovering the mysterious plan of the love of God in dialogue with us and creation;*
2. *To promote the Spirit of the Universal family guided by God, and to rediscover the importance of relating with each other as brothers and sisters who are different in cultures and religions, but one in the same human and spiritual aspirations;*
3. *To share an experience of the Culture of Dialogue and Peace.*

“SilPeace” stands for “Silsilah Peace” –a peace promoted in the spirit of the Movement with people of different cultures and religions. SilPeace is in the stage to organize SilPeace groups in schools, communities and boarding houses, and every year has been organizing Silsilah Youth Camps and conducts and maintains projects in collaboration with many youth groups of Zamboanga City area.

5. Dialogue among Religious Leaders

The most widely reported dialogue is taking place among religious leaders.

At the highest level there is the Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC). At the lower level, there is the Imam-Pastors-Priests Forum (IPPF).

5.1 Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC)¹³

On Nov. 29, 1996 a forum was held in Cebu between 19 Catholic bishops of Mindanao led by Archbishop Capalla and 19 members of the Ulama League of the Philippines led by Mahid Mutilan. This meeting took place in view of the recent signing of the peace agreement between the MNLF and the Government. In their joint statement entitled “In the Service of Peace and Development in Mindanao” they affirmed their “common commitment to peace and mutual understanding among religious communities in Mindanao.”¹⁴ Among the areas of concern they addressed were:

1. *What can we do to ensure the security of Christians in Muslim areas?*
2. *What are the key provisions of the SPCPD [Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development]? How can we assist our MNLF brothers who will not be integrated into the Military to go back to their regular community?*
3. *How can we maintain the momentum of peace-building and promote the Culture of Peace? How do we change the deep-seated prejudice on both sides? How do we bring about value formation and maximize the role of schools in this effort?*
4. *How do we relate with the MILF? How can we campaign for what is right and true and for genuine peace and development?*
5. *How can we concretely share our common beliefs, values and practices, doctrines and traditions? How can we distinguish between what is observed (what is done) and the official teaching behind this practice or action?*
6. *How can we work together to correct the media’s negative image of Muslims?*

The participants agreed to continue addressing these concerns and issues in further meetings. They decided to come together regularly to continue their dialogue.

Out of that meeting the “Bishops-Ulama Forum” (BUF) was established. The following year, the bishops of the National Council of Churches of the Philippines (NCCP) were invited to be part of this forum. Thus, the BUF became an ecumenical-interreligious forum of religious leaders. They decided

¹³ Sources: BUC Primer, Archbishop Fernando Capalla, *The Striving for Genuine Peace and Authentic Dialogue* (IIRE: Davao); see also Larousse, 381-388.

¹⁴ Capalla, 294.

to meet regularly three times a year. Each gathering would last for 2-3 days.

In 1998, the BUF secretariat was established in Iligan. Several years later, the forum changed to “Bishops-Ulama Conference” (BUC).

Since 1999, the BUC has been sponsoring the Mindanao Week of Peace – an event that was first initiated in Zamboanga and later in the major cities of Central and Western Mindanao. The Mindanao Week of Peace is celebrated on the last Thursday of November up to the first Wednesday of December each year. During this week, Muslims and Christians come together for various activities: prayer rallies, forum, symposium, Mosque & Church visitation, walk for peace, bike for peace, youth peace camp, etc.

The BUC also sponsors “Dialogue in the Academe.” These are seminars on peace education given to school administrators, teachers and students. The BUC has sponsored “Dialogue with Indigenous People’s Federations” (such as Panagtagbo and Panaghoy). Through its Youth Desk and the Mindanao Tripartite Youth Core, the BUC organizes and sponsors the “Tripartite Youth Peace Camp.” This has become a bi-annual event for Muslim, Christian and Lumad youth. Recently, the BUC launched the “BUC-AFP [Armed Forces of the Philippines]-PNP [Philippine National Police] Forum for Peace” to promote healthy and constructive dialogue with military and police officials throughout the region of Mindanao. The BUC also encouraged the middle-level religious leaders (imam, pastors and priests) to engage in dialogue.

5.2 Imam-Pastors-Priests Forum (IPPF)¹⁵

The IPPF is a Forum made up of imams, priests and pastors from various parts of Mindanao. It was set up with the encouragement and support of the Bishops-Ulama Conference. During the annual gathering of the Diocesan Clergy of Mindanao (DCM) in Davao in 1998, the BUC Convenors (Capalla & Mutilan) expressed their desire that dialogue would take place not just among bishops and ulamas but also among priests, pastors and imams. In response the DCM adopted a resolution that would promote this level of dialogue

In December 1998, 11 imams and 19 Catholic priests coming from Central and Western Mindanao held a conference in Davao to talk about how to promote dialogue, peace and development. In the following year, 50 Catholic priests and 35 imams held a dialogue/conference in Tagum.

From 2000-2006, most of the dialogue between priests and imams have taken place at the local or diocesan level. In recent years, Protestant pastors have also been involved. However, the IPPF gathering at the Mindanao-wide-level has been irregular and poorly attended. In early 2008, a series of meetings were held by the convenors to draft the vision-mission of IPPF. In June 2008, a Mindanao-wide general assembly was held in Davao City and the Vision-Mission was finalized: “*A community of religious leaders in Mindanao, united*

¹⁵ Sources: personal knowledge, IPPF brochure, Larousse, 388.

in truth of human life and molded by faith in the Almighty God/Allah for a peaceful Mindanao.”

Furthermore, these religious leaders committed themselves to:

1. *advocate culture of peace and development;*
2. *support common religious endeavors; and*
3. *establish networks and linkages with individuals, interfaith groups and institutions.*

6. Forms of Dialogue

Christian-Muslim dialogue, which is being carried out at various levels, has various forms or components: (1) dialogue of life, (2) dialogue of prayer and celebration, (3) dialogue of creed/faith, and (4) dialogue of action for peace and development.

6.1 Dialogue of Life

The most basic form of dialogue is when Christians and Muslims learn to live together as neighbors, friends and brothers/sisters. Bishop Benny Ttud likens it to breaking down walls and building bridges¹⁶ - a process where people enter into a relationship, bind themselves together and results in communion.¹⁷ This kind of dialogue usually takes place at the grassroots level – in neighborhood communities, villages, and schools. There is an opportunity for Christians and Muslims to meet, interact, and share with each other their life and experiences, their joys and sorrows, their hopes and dreams.

The case studies of Maladeg, Miryamville and Balabagan are examples of the dialogue of life taking place at the grassroots. The dialogue of life also takes place in movements like the Silsilah. The live-in seminar workshops provide this opportunity for sharing and developing a bond of friendship, and so does the immersion to Muslim and Christian communities. This is sustained when the graduates of the course meet regularly for the Silsilah forum in their respective cities.

The dialogue of life also takes place among the members of the BUC who meet regularly – two to three times a year. The regular gathering and sharing creates the bond of friendship and brotherhood. In his testimonial following the death of Aleem Mutilan (a convenor of BUC), Archbishop Capalla wrote: *“I write about my friend because we both organized the Bishops-Ulama Forum, now Conference, on 16 July 1996 ... Our friendship has become so strong and deep that he and some Ulama consider me as a brother. They feel at home at the bishop’s house and had stayed with us several times. In summary, through Dr.*

¹⁶ Bienvenido Ttud, *Dialogue of Life and Faith* (Claretian Publications: Quezon City, 1988), 102.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

*Mutilan's friendly and brotherly as well as his open and broadminded approach to us Catholic and Protestant bishops in Mindanao, a significant improvement has been observed in the relationships between Christians and Muslims.”*¹⁸

6.2 Dialogue of Faith

Another component of dialogue is the dialogue of faith. This is the opportunity for Muslims and Christians to share what they believe, to understand and appreciate each other's faith, and to discover their commonalities while respecting their differences.

It is usually the scholars, theologians and students who engage in such kind of dialogue. It rarely happens at the level of the grassroots communities. The schools and universities is the usual setting for such dialogue.

According to Bishop Tuddud: *“Dialogue does not mean one side winning the other over. Proselytism has no place in genuine dialogue. Readiness for dialogue of faith implies openness to the spiritual riches of the other religion.”*¹⁹

This kind of dialogue is happening in the Silsilah seminars. The participants learn the basic teachings of Islam/Qur'an and Christianity/Bible. The ongoing Silsilah Forum done by local chapters continue this dialogue of faith.

The Bishops-Ulama Conference has also engaged in this form of dialogue. During the first BUC gathering in 1996, this was one of the concerns which was listed as areas for dialogue: *“How can we concretely share our common beliefs, values and practices, doctrines and traditions? How can we distinguish between what is observed (what is done) and the official teaching behind this practice or action?”*²⁰

The focus of dialogue in 1998 was the sharing of the understanding of “peace” in Islam and in Christianity. In August 2001, the focus of dialogue was “Mary/Maryam” in the Qur'an and in the Bible.²¹ Here is an account on the BUC assembly in December 2001:

There was a sharing on the level of fasting, on how Christians and Muslims understand the practice of fasting and how it will promote peace... After the sharing and discussion, the group went to the Cathedral. Catholic practices and beliefs as well as images and symbols were explained to the Muslims and Protestants. Episcopalian and Anglican churches were also visited by the group and their way of worship was also explained to the Catholics and Muslims. In the process of exchange the Muslims also asked questions and explained also to the group their way of prayer and practices and beliefs. Finally, the group brought the level of dialogue from

¹⁸ Archbishop Fernando Capalla, testimonial given in honor of the late Mahid Mutilan during the Summit of Religious Leaders. Feb. 2008. http://pcid.org.ph/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=90&Itemid=1

¹⁹ Tuddud, 63.

²⁰ Capalla, 295.

²¹ BUC Primer, 10.

*talking about socio-political and economic concerns now to the level of faith and religion, which is very close and intimate to the heart of the believer - both Muslims and Christians.*²²

Due to the preoccupation with pressing issues on peace and development, the dialogue of faith has not been on the top of the agenda in past BUC assemblies.

6.3 Dialogue of Prayer and Celebration

Closely related to the dialogue of faith is the dialogue of prayer and of celebration

This is the occasion when Christians and Muslims pray together and also join each others' feasts. Every gathering, whether for meetings, rallies and marches, often start with common prayer. Priests, pastors, imams take turn in leading the prayer. The Qur'an and the Bible as displayed side by side. During Eid'l Fitr, some Christians join their Muslim friends or neighbors celebrate the breaking of the fast marking the end of Ramadhan. During Christmas and patronal feasts, some Muslims also join their Christian friends or neighbors in the celebration. Fr. Bert Layson shares his experience in his parish Pikit: *"Last Ramadhan, together with some Christians in the parish, we went around visiting our Muslim friends. We joined them in their 'buka' or breaking of the fast. We were their guests. In one of the houses, we were treated with an indigenous musical presentation of 'kulintang'. Then, during our patronal fiesta, we also invited our Muslim friends including the Muslim mayor. This time, they were our guests. We prepared 'halal food' for our visitors. Muslims and Christians ate together in the same church compound."*²³

6.4 Dialogue of Action

The most significant characteristic of Christian-Muslim dialogue in Mindanao is that it is taking place within the context of a common praxis for peace and development. It is a response to the situation of conflict and underdevelopment.

The violent conflict and the desire for peace bring together Christians and Muslims. They talk about the common problems that they face, they try to understand their roots, they plan together and they act together. This is evidently shown in the case studies of Maladeg and Miryamville. The Peace Zone in Nalapaan, Pikit is another example. This is also the case of the various common action like the Peace Caravan, the rallies for peace, etc.

This is also the dominant mode of dialogue in the Bishops-Ulama

²² Ibid., 12.

²³ Fr. Roberto Layson, "Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Mindanao amidst Uncertainties" <http://cpn.ndu.edu/christian%20article.doc>

Conference (BUC).

In a land where antagonism and mistrust continue to prevail among many Christians and Muslims, the BUC has become a powerful symbol of how religious leaders from both sides can engage in dialogue that promote mutual understanding, reconciliation, peace and development. Even during the height of the all-out war between the Government and the MILF, the BUC became the voice that is respected and listened to by both sides. The BUC has also submitted their suggestions to the negotiating panels of the MILF and the Government. The BUC has prevented the armed conflict from turning into a Christian-Muslim conflict. It also pressed both sides to declare a ceasefire and resume the peace negotiations. With the recent breakdown of the peace negotiations between the MILF and the Government, the BUC continues to appeal to both sides to come up with a final peace agreement. Recently the President, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, has asked the BUC through Archbishop Capalla to facilitate the process of grassroots consultation on how to bring about peace in Mindanao.²⁴

The dialogue of action for peace and development has become the framework or context for engaging in various forms of dialogue - dialogue of life, dialogue of faith, dialogue of prayer and celebration. When Christians and Muslims journey together for peace and development they develop a bond of friendship, they recognize each other as brothers/sisters - children of the one God – to whom they pray together, and they discover that they have many things in common. Fr. Bert Layson wrote about such experience:

During the all-out-war, the parish organized the Disaster Response Team composed of about 40 dedicated young Muslim and Christian volunteers. Whether under the scorching heat of the sun or under the pouring rain and amidst bullet fire, together these young volunteers visited evacuation centers and delivered food to the starving evacuees, demolishing the myth that the war in Mindanao was religious in nature. Most of them and their families have been victims themselves of previous wars. Many of them knew nothing about the theology or spirituality of Dialogue nor even heard about it. But they worked together as if they have been working together before. They would eat on the same table. They would cry together when they hear somebody had died. They would pray together. They would reflect together. And they found out that they have the same dream and that they were not enemies after all.²⁵

7. Limitations of Christian-Muslim Dialogue

The seed of dialogue has been sown and it continues to grow. Dialogue is an ongoing effort. Much has been achieved yet much more needs to be done.

²⁴ Interview with Archbishop Capalla by this author, October 13, 2008.

²⁵ Layson, "Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Mindanao amidst Uncertainties."

While there is already dialogue at the grassroots level, this is not yet widespread. There is a need to replicate what has been achieved in Maladeg, Nalapaan, Miryamville and other communities cited in the case studies.

The gatherings of local chapters of Silsilah are still irregular and poorly attended. There is a need to reach out to inactive members and to hold regular sessions.

Majority of the ulamas in the BUC is made up mostly of Maranaos. Because of this, questions have been raised whether they can speak for Muslims from other tribes (Maguindanao, Tausogs, Iranuns, etc.). There is a need to reach out to ulamas from other tribes. The attendance of Catholic bishops, especially those from dioceses without significant Muslim presence, is irregular.

The number of imams, priests and pastors involved in the IPPF is still small and the meetings are irregular. There is a need to expand the membership of IPPF and to make the gatherings more frequent and regular. Otherwise, it would be difficult to develop the bond of friendship among the members.

While the dialogue of life, action, prayer and celebration are prevalent, the dialogue of faith/theological exchange leaves much to be desired. This is an area that needs to be developed further. This means that Muslim scholars and Christian theologians need to come together and explore areas of convergence while respecting differences.

All these forms of dialogue carried out in various levels – at the grassroots, movements, and among religious leaders – have a significant contribution to peace and harmony among Christians and Muslims amidst the conflict in Mindanao.