**An Interfaith Dialogue on Nurturing the Spiritual Development of Children**

As a direct contribution to World Interfaith Harmony Week, the International Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood held an online interfaith dialogue on nurturing the spiritual development of children in the early years. Since 2018, the Consortium, comprised of diverse religious and spiritual leaders, faith-based organisations, academia and individual experts, have shared good practices and developed evidence-based and innovative approaches to integrate values-based education and spirituality in early childhood development. Their common vision is to support parents, caregivers and educators to nurture the spiritual development of children for their protection from violence and for the promotion of children’s holistic well-being, thus contributing to more peaceful and resilient societies.

This interfaith dialogue was moderated by Ms. Maria Lucia Uribe, Executive Director, Arigatou International – Geneva. The speakers of this panel were:

* Prof. Anantanand Rambachan, Emeritus Professor of Religion, St. Olaf College, Minnesota, USA;
* Sister Grace Marie Horan, FSE., Representative Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue;
* Sheikh Ibrahim Lethome, Centre for Sustainable Conflict Resolution, and Legal Advisor, Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims, Kenya;
* Dr. Vinya Ariyaratne, President, Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, Sri Lanka;
* Dr. Siobhan Fitzpatrick, CBE, Chairperson, International Network on Peace Building for Young Children, and Regional Vice Chairperson, Early Childhood Peace Consortium.

The dialogue began with a discussion on the role of religious communities to protect children from violence, delving into what scriptures convey – to protect children from violence – and statistics that show how it is sadly within the home that many children experience violence. The speakers emphasised the important role that religious leaders play in the lives of families and in child upbringing to ensure children grow holistically and develop spiritually, as well as to challenge cultural norms and parenting practices that condone violence. Through their role as teachers, their extensive outreach in communities and their special moral authority, religious leaders are uniquely placed to promote children’s well-being and nurture their spiritual development. As a reflection from participants and speakers emerged the fact that whilst religious leaders do hold this unique position, many would also benefit from more learning opportunities to broaden their understanding on the impact of violence against children, and how spiritual nurturing contributes to children's well-being.

Ms. Uribe shared that spiritual development is an often-missing element in early childhood development (ECD) programming and an under-researched domain. It was put to the speakers to share the critical role spiritual development plays in protecting children from violence and, if this is such a powerful tool, how it may be better integrated into ECD programmes. The speakers highlighted that spiritual development is recognised in the UN’s Convention on the Rights of the Child particularly on Article 27 and that, properly integrated, spiritual development encourages children and adults to respect, understand and empathise with the other.

Spiritual development fosters children’s ability to be connected in the world through developing their sense of identity, belonging and connection with nature, God, the Divine, the Transcendent or Ultimate Reality, and with others. Through nurturing this connection and their innate spiritual capacities, children flourish and are better able to contribute to building communities of love, a culture of peace and tolerance, free of violence and discrimination. It was recommended to work with all sectors to promote the spiritual development of children, to take advantage of international and national frameworks that protect children, and to ensure that we always listen to children so that they are given a platform to be heard and are able to express their agency.

There was a round of questions and answers for the speakers towards the end of the webinar and there was high engagement from the audience throughout the session. There was a total of 173 registered participants to the event, with 60 in attendance, from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas from religious institutions, academia and the non-profit sector. There was also a communications campaign on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram that reached Arigatou International – Geneva’s online following of almost 5,100 followers on all platforms, and the event was also livestreamed through Facebook.

To end the webinar, a short presentation was given on a newly-developed Toolkit to nurture the spiritual development of children in the early years for the protection of children from violence and for the promotion of their holistic well-being. The Toolkit, developed by the Consortium, is comprised of 8 booklets including a conceptual framework, learning programs (for adults and for children), guidance for organisations on integrating spiritual development within their existing ECD programs, and a guide for religious and spiritual leaders on their unique role to foster children’s spiritual development. It can be viewed [here](https://childspiritualdevelopment.org/2022/11/17/toolkit/).

It has been a week since the interfaith dialogue took place, and a survey sent to audience members afterwards shows that there is a demand for more events on how the spiritual development of children contributes to peace-building. The survey also shows that the event resonated strongly with many participants due to the need for greater interfaith efforts on how we can protect children from violence and harness the important role of religious leaders to promote children’s well-being. This is very encouraging and, therefore, the Consortium plan to convene more interfaith webinars such as this to continue promoting interfaith dialogue to enhance mutual understanding, harmony and cooperation among people.