

Report of
“Learning to Live Together” workshop
in WCRP Summer Camp

September 15th, 2013

Youth outdoor activity center
Chichibu-city Saitama



Date and time: Sunday, September 15, 2013, from 9:00 to 11:30 am

Place: 2nd Meeting hall, Youth outdoor activity center, Chichibu-city Saitama prefecture

Participants: 23 (Male 8; Female 15) from 8 religious (Buddhist and Christian) and secular organizations

Facilitators: Kumiko Shirai and Naoko Hara

Themes: Understanding that Indifference = Violence

Deepen understanding of MDGs

Reflect on what one can do, as a religious person, for world peace and children of the world

Outline of the WCRP summer camp

WCRP summer camp provides a space to deepen mutual understanding and trust between youth from different religions through exchange; learn about religion and peace; and, explore new ways for peace activities through dialogue and cooperation. Youth of various ages, from different places and different religions or affiliations gather and deepen exchanges by learning about and accepting each other's religion. It is held each year in September and gathers between 20 and 50 young religious participants.

This year's theme was "Heart to Heart – What we can do now from Chichibu." Three days were spent hearing about experiences in the areas affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011 and the situation in Fukushima where the nuclear plant was partially destroyed and radiations continue leaking, learning about the MDGs and reflecting on what we, as young people with religious beliefs, can do now.



Motivation

We performed a participative activity with the objective to physically and intellectually experience the MDGs. Participants were split in two teams, boys and girls, and we explained the situation: they have to buy medicine for a child who has a stomach ache. The list of medicine shown to the boys' team was written in Japanese, so they were able to buy the appropriate medicine, but the list shown to the girls' team was in Arabic. Unable to understand the list, they ended up buying poison and the child suffering if he had took it.

This showed participants that there are many countries with low literacy rate and where mostly girls are not even given the right to education. They are discriminated as being only good to give birth and raise children. Participants shared that lives, which could be saved, are lost due to mistakes when choosing medicine or not giving the proper dose and that lack of knowledge makes obvious situations not so anymore. Wrapping up, we invited participants, as young persons with religious beliefs, to turn their attention to the wide world and underlined the importance of considering what is significant.



Exploration - Dialogue - Discovery

As a case study, we split the participants in 3 groups and asked them to discuss how they would react if they heard a parent shout violently at his child.

There are two aspects. First, can one feel empathy and show concern, although one was just enjoying himself. Secondly, can one stop neglect or abuse by just going to check on the house next door, although one just heard the mother shouting at her child and didn't witness physical violence.

For the discussion, we invited each group to choose an animator to lead and encourage discussion. All participants listened carefully to each other and discussions went smoothly. In each group, we saw participants seek or confirm the opinions of those who didn't actively talked.



Group discussions

Each group, represented by someone, shared with everyone the results of their discussions. We had to do it as a speech in front of everyone due to the size of the hall and the location of microphones.

Here are some opinions that were presented:

- One cannot ignore the situation, but it's not possible to act immediately.
- One should contact social services or the police.
- I would like to become a person that the mother can consult. It's important to create a space where someone would listen to her.
- It's important to react on the spot, but also to consider the idea of "neighborhood" and create together an environment where a mother can raise her children feeling safe.



Reflection - Action

In the previous situation, participants reflected on what they would do if they witnessed violence, but this time, we asked them to consider and discuss the situation from the point of view of the child and the mother.

We asked participants what would be hard and how they would feel, if they were a child suffering from abuse or neglect. Would they seek help or endure? Considering the point of view of the parent, is the parent bad because he/she is violent, or does it come out because of something in his/her heart? To stimulate the discussion, we asked them how they feel and what they would like to do.

At this point, some participants asked the following:

- What are the circumstances of the mother and the child: their age, is it a boy or a girl, is it her own child or from another marriage?
- It is easier to discuss a more precise situation.

We replied that in this method, the focus is on how one feels towards the situation and it is possible that each interprets it differently. We explained that there is no right answer and that participants should imagine the situation as they want, explain it and share their opinions with their group.

After the group discussions, we shared the results together.

Here are some examples of the opinions that were presented:

Child perspective	Parent perspective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I want to be held tight • As being abused or neglected becomes his reality, he will not be able to think anymore of running away. • Because he's sad when the parent is mad at him, he will try very hard to be a "good" child and restrain himself. • No matter how much abuse or neglect, he still loves his mother. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I need help, I want to stop my abuse, but I don't know how. • I want an environment where I can get help and someone who would listen. • Out of vanity, she doesn't want other people to find out that she's neglecting her child. • The parent also wants to be held tight.

It is equally hard and sad for both sides, the abuser and the abused, and somewhere in their heart, they wish someone would stop them and be compassionate. Participants realized that the saddest part is when someone is ignored although he/she seeks help and we announced for the first time that the topic this time would be "Indifference = Violence." We reiterated what was said during the presentation on the MDGs, that while we are here like this, discussing and enjoying ourselves, there are many people who suffer from poverty, inequality and violence. Finally, we shared with all those present that what we can do as religious people is to realize and reflect on the many occasions that we are indifferent, not only to the world but in our daily lives, improve ourselves and have sympathy even for those we cannot see.

Impression sharing and survey

Ms. Sayuri Aiki (Rissho Koseikai)

I have learned a lot. It's the first time that I take part in this workshop. It's possible to think objectively about an issue, but it's not so easy to put oneself in the others' shoes and consider the same issue. For instance, it was very difficult for me to consider the issue from the perspective of the child. I realized that I couldn't completely understand his feelings when we were told to consider the issue from different perspectives, i.e. the mother, the child. When we were told to think from an outsider's perspective, I really didn't know how to react



and I felt different. Standing in someone else's shoes was an opportunity to realize that if one really wants to make it stop for example, one has to honestly act in this way. Now, I would like to replicate this opportunity with people in my organization as well.

Ms. Yurie Oshiro (Rissho Koseikai)

We were asked what we would do as people with religious beliefs and I thought in those terms, but I am sure this could also be done with people who don't hold religious beliefs. Then, when I considered what I could do as a person with religious beliefs, I realized that, precisely because we hold religious beliefs, we do have the ability to pray and feel sympathy for others, even those we can't see. Regardless of faith, we have received the gift of caring about others beyond differences, visible or invisible. I am thankful for this and felt that we have to put it into practice.

Mr. Keiji Komuro (Myochikai)

I am from Myochikai and we often have this kind of workshop, but each time, I discover many things and this time too, through the example of a parent and its child. I am not a child anymore, but I am not a parent yet either, so what we did today, discussing about listening to a child from his perspective and how to take care of a child, this will be very useful when I become a parent. It was really great.



Reflections, Evaluation and Future Improvements

It is always possible to consider things objectively, but through the workshop, many participants were able to put themselves in the other's shoes and consider things from that perspective. At first, it seemed difficult for some to do it, but listening to others' opinion and reflecting on the input from the facilitators, they gradually realized their own indifference and started participating to the discussions not as outsiders, but as concerned parties. Apparently, numerous participants felt that MDGs or physical abuse are distant issues



and hard to relate to, but they realized their own indifference and that they can act and improve it at their own scale.

It seems that participants had vivid experiences when discussing things from the parent's perspective. Without particular guidance from the facilitators, their discussions shifted from the common perception that "the parent is bad, the child is innocent", to understanding the parent may be facing some problem or end up abusing because he/she feels lonely and starting to ask what they could do to help such parent and considering their role as religious persons.

Through this workshop on the theme of "Indifference = violence", we wanted to share the perspectives of the abuser, the abused and the outsiders to convey the idea that without realizing it, we can be violent just by being indifferent. However, and this is something that needs improvement on our part, we lost focus on this theme when we discussed and had to answer many detailed questions about the perspective of the parent and that of the child. Furthermore, it was difficult for participants, who were mostly students in their early twenties, to put themselves in the position of a parent or a child as they are far from this situation and, we tried to set up too many perspectives that were not connected enough which created confusion.

Next time, we should try to encourage more discussion and opinion sharing by setting up a situation to which participants can relate more easily. Regarding the remark that it was difficult to put oneself in the other's shoes, we should try to give more hints and/or advice, through role-playing or video for example, but without limiting the imagination of participants.

Conclusion

Although there is room for improvements, it is an honor being able to contribute to the first steps of interreligious dialogue in Japan. Participants' reactions were also encouraging as they asked for more similar opportunities to reflect together on various themes. We had some apprehensions doing this workshop with people with different beliefs, if the ideas would be accepted and the discussions would go smoothly, but everyone participated actively in the discussions and we were very glad to see participants spontaneously discuss how they should translate their thoughts into action. We also learned a lot through this first LTLT workshop outside of the Myochikai community.

Japan is said to be one of the safest place in the world. Education systems are in place and crime rate is low. If one loses his wallet, one will probably have it returned from the nearest police station with no money missing. The Japanese people are kind and have

an ethical heart. But, maybe because it is so peaceful at home, we tend to regard problems in the world as not ours and find it difficult to understand the feelings of people suffering from conflict or poverty. It is not easy to feel empathy for someone we cannot see.

This is why I would like to develop and expand LTLT in Japan and reflect together with more and more people. As we continue to heighten and develop our ethical hearts, we can feel more empathy for others, turn our hearts to the world and there are many wonderful elements that we can share with people abroad as well.

In Japan, there are still many people with prejudices against religion, but at the same time, many people embrace different religious traditions together, such as Buddhism and Shinto. This context is very appropriate and I wish we could provide more opportunities to introduce LTLT, turn our eyes together to issues in society and the world that are hard to see and provide an occasion for people to develop their empathy. LTLT does not belong only to Myochikai. I hope that more and more people can learn to live together and share this feeling of happiness.

Finally, my heartfelt gratitude goes to Ms. Kumiko Shirai, who planned and facilitated this workshop with me; and Mr. Shozo Fujita, Secretary General, Mr. Noriaki Ito and Ms. Masue Suzuki from Arigatou International, for all the advices they provided during the planning and preparation.

Naoko Hara

Arigatou International