

Expanding Mindanao Peace Activities among Religions Through the Philippine Religious Peace Academy

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In 2013, a decade ago, I became involved with HWPL, an experience that stands out in my memory. It was during this time that I had the privilege of meeting Chairman Lee Man-hee in the Philippines. I vividly recall sharing with Chairman Lee my suggestion to expand his peace efforts to Mindanao. To my delight, he promptly took action on my proposal. This proactive response led to a remarkable outcome on January 24, 2014, when HWPL played a pivotal role in foreshadowing what is now recognized as the "Mindanao Peace Agreement."

This symbolic agreement took place in General Santos City and brought together Archbishop Fernando R. Capalla, a representative of the Christian community, and Governor Esmel G. Mangudadatu, who represented the Islamic community. This significant event underscores the power of collaboration and dialogue in fostering peace, thus signaling the beginning of HWPL peace works in the Philippines.

Six years later, during the first quarter of 2019, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) was created in the southern Philippine Island of Mindanao. In effect, this constituted the Bangsamoro Peace Agreement, the culmination of a long drawn-out peace process since the 1960's that sought to end intermittent hostilities between Muslim armed groups and the Philippine military.

Earlier in 2017, an ISIS-influenced group of Muslim militants engaged government forces in a protracted siege of Marawi, acclaimed as the Islamic capital of the country. There were eyewitness reports of looting, hostage-taking, and summary killings of minority groups. However, there were also accounts of how Muslims risked their lives to protect their Christian co-workers; on the other hand, Christian households offered food and drink to Muslim refugees, who were fleeing on foot from Marawi to safer ground. The internally displaced persons from Marawi and neighboring areas reached almost 400,000. In the five months of intense urban fighting, the city center was flattened. Efforts at reconstruction are still ongoing.

Over the past decade, HWPL has shared the same message of peace with various communities in Mindanao.

Even the leadership of BARMM recognizes the significant contributions of HWPL's peace-building efforts in Mindanao. The recent establishment of the HWPL Philippine Religious Peace Academy or Philippine RPA is a novel effort to reach a wider audience through an online platform to appreciate the scriptural teachings of both Islam and Christianity. Likewise, the ongoing dialogue meetings sponsored by WARP offices among religious scholars and practitioners of various faith traditions in different regions are opening the doors for global solidarity, peace and harmony.

The launching of the Religious Peace Academy moves us to reflect on these three key words: Religious, Peace, Academy. Religious refers to religions. And religion means our belief in God, our Creator, our source of all being. Despite the differences in our religious beliefs, we all share our faith in God, and also our own understanding of the world. This faith goes beyond this world. It is a transcendent faith, but it is also a faith that makes us truly concerned about our situation in this world.

And this is precisely why we work for Peace because our religions that drive us to love of God and love of neighbor are religions for peace -- whether Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, or of any other religious beliefs, including those of the indigenous people. We are all working for peace as our Creator, the source of all being, has originally created a world of peace and harmony for all his children.

Finally, the meaning of Academy underscores our efforts to learn together. We would like first to engage in dialogue, to listen carefully to what other traditions tell us. And also to be able to share our own understanding of our religious beliefs. And ultimately, to seek common ground and common values through this learning and sharing together. So the Academy means a school of dialogue. A school of learning together and appreciating what is good in many other traditions.

Since May 2023, I have had several meetings with the HWPL Philippines team to discuss how we could start Philippine RPA in the land of Mindanao. Finally last August 1, we conducted its launching in Cotabato City, together with the blessings and support given by Chief Minister Ahod Ebrahim of BARMM. Almost 500 participants joined both offline and online, composed of religious leaders, youth and women's organizations, educators and students.

Christianity and Islam are the major religions in the Philippines. And it is the vision and mission of the RPA to build bridges among these religions. Through the efforts of the religious leaders and the HWPL Philippines, we strive to spread this program not only in Mindanao but also on a nationwide scale by reaching national leaders

of Islam from the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos. Moreover, on the side of Christianity, I have extended this dialogue platform to other bishops, priests, seminarians and church communities. By leading as example, I also prepared several recorded video lessons from the topics of Philippine RPA formulated by HWPL.

In a joint statement "On Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together," signed in Abu Dhabi in February 2019 (almost at the same time as the creation of BARMM), Pope Francis and the Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb called on Christians and Muslims and all faith communities to forge "the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard." This resonates with the call that the World Alliance of Religions for Peace has repeatedly been making.

May the strengthening of the ongoing peace agreement in Mindanao through the Philippines Religious Peace Academy be a challenge and inspiration for other conflict-affected areas to forge a Culture of Peace among Religions as an essential dimension in the integral development of our human society.

