NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

Peace seekers gather on Kenyan plain

Tom Roberts | Apr. 16, 2012

A lone figure visits a likeness of the Buddha at Mekena Hills on the Laikipia Nature Conservancy in Kenya, during the Global Peace Initiative of Women conference in March. (Photos Margaret K. Lynch)

NAIROBI and LAIKIPIA NATURE CONSERVANCY, KENYA -- A pressing reality of the 21st century is that an ever-diminishing globe will require an ever-expanding degree of tolerance and cooperation among an astounding array of differing convictions -- religious and political among the most contentious -- if we?re ever to approach anything resembling world peace. We simply can no longer ignore or avoid the other.

The point was made in dramatic fashion during a 10th-anniversary gathering of the Global Peace Initiative of Women held March 1-7 in partnership with and at the site of the Laikipia Nature Conservancy in Kenya. The conservancy is a remote 100,000 acres in the northern part of the country near the Rift Valley, thought by many to be the birthplace of humanity. The valley itself is a stunning plain, open to view from elevations atop sheer drops at several vantage points on the six-hour drive between the capital, Nairobi, and the preserve.

The initiative, which draws on religious leaders to discuss critical global issues, including peace and reconciliation in some of the most war-torn regions of the world, is the brainchild of Dena Merriam, who has been working in interfaith efforts since the late 1990s, when she served as vice chair of the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders held at the United Nations. The longtime student of Paramahansa Yogananda and practitioner of Kriya Yoga meditation came to realize that both women and Eastern religious traditions were much underrepresented at international peace and interreligious gatherings, and she set out to change that with the founding of the Global Peace Initiative of Women in 2002.

The event in Kenya, ?Awakening the Healing Heart: Transforming Communities through Love and Compassion,? was conducted over eight days, beginning with a daylong session at the United Nations Information Centre in Nairobi. In opening remarks there, Merriam said, ?The human community is at war not just with each other, but with the Earth. We must end the war.? That connection, an inextricable link between human-on-human violence and violence toward the rest of creation, became both a presumption and a point of discussion for the rest of the week.

In a bit of hellish irony, it also became a kind of script for days of brutal violence on the preserve in the weeks following the conference, days in which poachers who kill elephants for tusks to be traded on the black market reportedly set fire to nearly half the acreage as an act of retaliation against the preserve?s patrols and its owner, Kuki Gallmann.

In remarks to the group on the first day, U.N. Undersecretary Achim Steiner, an environment expert, pointed out that in the same room in Nairobi he had ?seen decades of delegations coming together to describe their differences? and only occasionally did he witness a breakthrough to ?common ground.?

The Global Peace Initiative of Women event, he said, provided an opportunity to celebrate what is being done.

Poverty, he said, ?is the greatest enemy of the environment.? He urged those attending to ?look for underlying causes? to those events ?we describe in dark images.?

And just as surely as the group was urged to look outward, Zarko Andricevic, founder of the Buddhist Center in Zagreb, Croatia, voiced an alternating tug inward. Andricevic emphasized Buddhism?s offering of ?the experience of interconnectedness.? It is more than theory, he said, it is an experience ?that has transformative power to change from within. If there is not inner change or transformation,? he said, one ?can?t do the work outside.?

Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister, co-chair of the initiative with the Rev. Joan Brown Campbell, director of religion at the Chautauqua Institution, placed the question in rather apocalyptic terms:

?What can possibly be done on issues so great by the likes of us? By people with little money and even less official power?

?And yet here we are -- you and I -- in one of the great struggles of human history. This struggle is for the very preservation of the globe,? Chittister said, referring to environmental degradation and the growing threat of climate change. ?To make wrong-hearted decisions now, to choose denial over a determination to reverse this debacle, may well end existence on Earth as we know it. We are a people with the chronicle of time in our hands,? she said.

She said humanity has come ?face to face with the consequences of what it means to ravage the Earth -- to choke off its air and poison its waters, to destroy its rain forests and rape its resources, and to decimate its animal life for fur coats and ivory artifacts and face creams -- and most of all for money and profit and power.?

The consequences, she said, can be seen in exhausted resources, disappearing animal species, growing desertification and rising oceans.

?How do we explain that kind of moral suicide to people who look to us for answers to the great questions of life? We religious professionals who love to talk about morality and spirituality and sanctity and salvation, nirvana, enlightenment, creation and the will of God.

?How can this devastation of global life possibly be the will of God, and why did we never know that??

Religion itself and its theologies of human domination have led to excessive consumerism and given justification for ?rapacious greed that fueled that inordinate accumulation.?

It is time, Chittister said, for those ?who call ourselves ?religious? to think again about what God is really saying in all our scriptures about creation, about human agency, about human responsibility and begin to teach it differently.?

If the gathering in Africa gave any indication of the group?s purpose and work, then at least part of it is to sustain a conversation between deep interior spirituality -- a richness of meditation and contemplation across traditions was evident throughout the program -- and some of the bleakest human rights abuses and violent circumstances on the planet. If there was a subtext to the conversation, it was occasional exchanges between an outward kind of Western pragmatism and the more meditative and internal orientation of many of the Eastern traditions.

So here, on an African plain, many of the world?s religions as well as the nonreligious gathered where lions made a noisy early morning visit to a meadow as participants slept in safari tents, where trumpeting elephants were heard during an evening meal and where zebras and impalas moved across a near horizon at breakfast.

The more than 60 people from 25 countries who attended included lay practitioners of Buddhism and Hinduism as well as Buddhist monks, Buddhist nuns, Hindu swamis, Catholic nuns, Protestant ministers, Muslims, a Jewish social anthropologist, a Palestinian psychosocial therapist, African physicians who practice traditional Western medicine as well as one who is a traditional healer, an African chief who is a herbalist and spiritualist, humanists, at least one theosophist, and a fair sampling, in religious terms, of none of the above. Many of those attending could also be described by the remarkable work they do advocating and working for justice and human rights, often among some of the most unjust, not to mention complex, situations on the globe.

There were moments when the conversations grasped at the ethereal. A caution from Gail Grossman Freyne of Ireland, a family therapist with an intellectual interest in eco-feminist ethics, against the ?deep environmentalist? inclination to wipe out distinctions among species, brought a long response on sentience.* Sraddhalu Ranade of India, a scientist and a scholar of the late Indian sage Sri Aurobindo, in an extensive dissertation, described scientific experiments that recorded the activity of molecules in animal and plant life and

other objects that demonstrated, he said, that even in what we consider inanimate forms there can be expressions of anxiety and fear to perceived threats.

But the conversation was never far from the more recognizable and often horrific threats to humans.

Sunday Lojong, who works for the Sudan country office of the African Leadership and Reconciliation Ministry (ALARM), may have gotten away for a few days from her newly established country of South Sudan, but the heartache of its struggles wasn?t far away. On the first day of the conference, Kenya?s Daily Nation newspaper contained a special section with a cover storied headlined, ?The stain on South Sudan: Inter-ethnic fighting and failed promises put Salva Kiir?s administration on the spot.?

Peace and reconciliation are simultaneously compelling needs and often distant dreams in such places. Stories of ethnic and tribal killings, unimaginable brutality against women and children were always close to the surface.

Dealing with the aftermath is a long and difficult slog.

Dr. Célestin Musekura, founder of ALARM, was born and raised in Rwanda and educated in seminary in Kenya and at Dallas Theological Seminary, where his doctoral research was on contemporary models of forgiveness.

He currently splits his time between Dallas and Africa, where ALARM has a ministry of 54 full-time staff training church and community leaders in Burundi, Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

In his own experience, Musekura told the conference, he had to confront the notion of forgiveness in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, in which Hutus killed an estimated 800,000 people, as much as three-quarters of the minority Tutsi population.

?I believe the concept of love and forgiveness is not something from outside,? Musekura said, because each individual must call on those qualities.

Loving one?s neighbor, he said, is a matter of ?loving enough to not cause harm. Men and women in the community who taught love and forgiveness,? understood that it is not imposed by anyone else, but occurs because it is human.

?I don?t believe forgiveness is something from outside -- it is human,? he said. ?God gave us the capacity to be compassionate.?

Musekura said we need ?to educate the people to look back and say this is my neighbor.?

He said, ?Ignorance causes people to do the unthinkable.?

Forgiveness, he said, doesn?t occur quickly or easily. It also doesn?t mean wiping out or trying to just get beyond what has happened.

?To begin to explain forgiveness -- we must make people understand that what was done to them was evil,? he said. ?Otherwise, we will be misunderstanding what forgiveness is. You begin by judging what was done to you as evil, as inhuman, you allow people to be angry.? He said that?s the reason ALARM does counseling for trauma -- people express how they feel. ?Those who are counseling from a Christian perspective,? he said, must understand that ?forgiveness is not just a microwave solution.?

Many there seemed to answer Chittister?s question about what people with little money and no official power can do. Shomberwa Marina Ntamwenge of Congo, for instance, is president of the Federation of Protestant

Women in the Ecumenical Church of Democratic Republic of Congo and conducts workshops on peace-building and seminars for couples on gender issues, and advocates for an end to violence against women.

Jessica Okello of Uganda is general secretary of Pan Africa Christian Women Association and heads the Women and Children Department of ALARM in Uganda. Her work involves her with many women affected by the 23-year civil war in northern Uganda.

Dr. Sakena Yacoobi seemed to exemplify the possibilities of the individual against great odds in the extreme. The 61-year-old from Afghanistan came to the United States as a lone teenager just out of high school in the early 1970s at the encouragement of some U.S. Peace Corps volunteers who, she said, recognized that she had potential and that it would not be fully realized in her home country.

She stayed with an American family in Michigan, took intensive language courses and, though accepted at Stanford, UCLA Davis and Berkeley, took the family?s advice and went to the smaller University of the Pacific in Stockton, Calif., where she took pre-med courses. She eventually did a master?s in public health at Loma Linda University, and later completed a doctorate in that field. A Muslim, she said she remembers her time at the Seventh Day Adventist university in Loma Linda, Calif., as among the best times of her life. ?I learned so much from them,? she said.

Along the way, she worked four jobs simultaneously at times to supplement scholarship money and in 1987, after her family escaped during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to refugee camps in Iran, she was able to purchase a house in Michigan and sponsored 13 members of her family to the United States.

Once they were settled, she took off for the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan and began collecting the women who sat idly, uneducated, into schools she founded. She?s continued to this day doing that work, under the Afghan Institute of Learning, which she founded. She said she has established hundreds of schools for girls throughout Afghanistan.

In the weeks following the conference, those who attended began receiving emails detailing a five-day fight to save the game preserve. According to the reports (details can be seen at www.gallmannkenya.org/news.html) tension between poachers and armed men who patrol the preserve turned violent and the poachers began setting fires that were swept by wind through thousands of acres of brush. The fires were brought under control on the fifth day and rain began falling at the beginning of April.

[Tom Roberts is *NCR* editor at large. His email address is troberts@ncronline.org. Read about Roberts? encounter with the lion at NCRonline.org/node/29347.]

**Editor's note: An earlier version of this story incorrectly attributed this information to Mary-Faeth Chenery.*

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