

# **OFFICIAL REPORT**

## **Sri Lankan Church-leaders visit to Norway**

### **November 23-29, 2023**

**From**  
**National Christian Churches of Sri Lanka**  
**Church of Norway**  
**Caritas Sri Lanka**  
**Caritas Norway**

As a prelude to the Advent season, an ecumenical team of Sri Lankan church-leaders visited Oslo in a 6 days' exposure to Norwegian church life, dialogue on the churches' role in post-war Sri Lanka and to celebrate our joint ecumenical witness to truth, justice, peace and reconciliation.

Members of the ecumenical team from Sri Lanka were:

*Bishop Dusantha Lakshman Rodrigo, Bishop of Colombo, Church of Ceylon*

*Bishop Christian Noel Emmanuel, Bishop of Trincomalee*

*Deekshya Illagasinghe, Executive director South Asians for Human Rights*

*Rev Fr Piyal Janaka Fernando, National Director in the Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-Faith dialog in the Catholic Bishops Conference*

*Rev Sr. Deepa, Program Officer in the Commission for Justice and Peace in the Catholic Bishops conference/Caritas Sri Lanka*

*Rev Fr. Luke Nelson Perera, National Director of Caritas Sri Lanka*

*Rev Sujithar Sivanayagam, General Secretary National Christian Council of Sri Lanka*

### **Background for the visit**

Since 1999/2000 Church of Norway has been an accompanier to the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka (NCCSL) through the years when the Norwegian Government facilitated a peace process between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE. The accompaniment was never meant to be a traditional partnership program. Church leaders travelled up and down between Oslo and Colombo on a mutual learning process for our respective churches seeking information and analysis on the peace process to be used in ecumenical advocacy. To encourage the churches to fully support the emerging peace process and strengthen the hopes became a vital part of the accompaniment – until the process stranded in 2003/2004.

Later, Caritas Norway developed a «Religious Amity»-program in partnership with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL) to be implemented in all dioceses.

After the Easter-terror attack on three Sri Lankan churches in 2019, the Church of Norway Bishop Rt Rev Kari Veiteberg and Roman Catholic Oslo Bishop Rt Rev Bernt

Eidsvig led an ecumenical team on a solidarity visit to the churches in Sri Lanka. During that visit, the idea of a return-visit to Oslo was born.

### **Some of the exposures during the Oslo- visit**

- Two joyful Sunday services with Sri Lankan Christian diaspora in Oslo.
- Meeting with Sri Lankan diaspora groups who asked questions about investment and professional job seeking in Sri Lanka.
- Colourful hospitality enjoyed in the new-built Tamil Hindu temple.
- Meeting the leadership of the Christian Council of Norway --a council in which the Roman Catholic Church and the Pentecostal churches are full members.
- Meeting with the National Catholic-Lutheran Commission (KATLUSA).
- High-level meeting in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) gave us an opportunity to express our disappointment with what is seen as a lack of interest in the future of Sri Lanka, exemplified by the closing down of the Norwegian Embassy in Colombo.
- Visit to the Parliament – meeting with a prominent member of the Opposition and former Minister of International Development.
- Informal meeting with Norwegian Peace Envoy Erik Solheim, presently Advisor to the Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremasinghe on Environmental Issues.

### **Oslo Paper**

The visiting team from Sri Lanka came with a willingness to share their analysis on both the ecumenical and political situation in their home country. This was highly appreciated by the hosts. Of great interest was also the background paper called the «Oslo Paper» which the Secretary General of NCCSL and the National Director of Caritas Sri Lanka presented to the Norwegian hosts. The paper convincingly shows convergence in programs of peace building, justice and national reconciliation. It starts with maintaining strongly that «visible expression of oneness» is much needed in Sri Lanka. The Oslo Paper is annexed to this report.

The Norwegian hosts applaud NCCSL and CBCSL/Caritas for working out the Oslo Paper.

Main challenges for the Sri Lankan churches – echoed in the Oslo Paper – were key concerns in our dialog during the days in Oslo. These were:

- Witness in a multi-religious country and strengthening interreligious relations
- The churches' contributions to National Unity and Reconciliation
- Ecumenical contexts and challenges
- The churches' accountability towards minorities
- The churches' accountability towards climate change

### **Public witness**

A painful picture of a failed state was drawn up. There is a pushback of democracy and accountability. Minority rights have come under even more pressure. Participation from ethnic and religious communities in the life of the nation are

neglected. Government policy to re-establish financial accountability is missing. Good governance is pending. People has taken to the streets.

Religious clergy of many colours played a significant role during the Aragalaya weeks, and Catholic sisters were in the forefront. The churches were seen as standing with the people. Other examples would be when churches in Sri Lanka respond jointly to government bills, give public witnesses supporting marginalized plantation communities or support long marches across the country campaigning for human rights.

### **Healing the nation**

Healing the nation is seen by the Sri Lankan churches as the most precious task. Which role should the Sri Lankan churches take in the quest for national unity and reconciliation? This was probably the most frequently asked question to the visiting team from Sri Lanka during the visit in Oslo.

Is there a sincere willingness from the Government to engage with the Christian communities to foster healing? Does the recently presented Bill on National Unity and Reconciliation provide a platform on which the churches can work together for the healing of the nation?

At the same time: Could the churches take a lead in advocating for the much-needed clarity on the whereabouts of those who disappeared during the last days of the conflict? There must be many people that know the destiny of many of those who have disappeared. Could a mechanism be created in which those people – and not the perpetrators – could be invited to give the information they have? Would not more clarity be of enormous help for the bereaved families and for the healing of the nation?

The pilgrimage to Utøya – the peaceful island which for one hour and some minutes became a killing field – where 77 young social democrats attending a summer camp were shot in 2011 by a young Norwegian Fascist. The thoughtful and unique reconstruction triggered joint reflection on memorialization in Sri Lanka's post-war situation. We all saw the long and difficult way ahead until Sri Lanka has built an inclusive culture of memory of the victims of the decades-long civil war.

### **Ecumenical situation**

The joint Caritas/CBCSL – NCCSL hosting of the Norwegian Ecumenical Pastoral visit to Sri Lanka in August 2019 was a breakthrough for ecumenical relations between churches in our two countries. This years' visit was planned to take this relationship a step further.

The historical context of colonialism and missionary activities has influenced the development of various Christian denominations in Sri Lanka. There are historic reasons for the huge numeric difference between the Catholic and Protestant Sri Lanka. There have been years during which NCCSL and CBCSL/Caritas have operated separated from one another. But also years – like in the 1990s – when the Justice and Peace Commissions of both CBCSL and NCCSL had joint meetings to coordinate respective advocacy and peace programs and also took joint initiatives. In times such as ours, ecumenical cooperation needs to be invigorated.

We heard some of the concerns and apprehensions created when new up-coming Christian groups in Sri Lanka are seeking membership in NCCSL. With their theology and sometimes aggressive evangelism, they are seen by some traditional corners of the church as a threat to the ecumenical movement. Several factors might be relevant to take into consideration, like unparity in resources and infrastructure and theological differences when it comes to interpretation of scripture and doctrine.

The Catholic concern was aired clearly. We also heard of honest debates and concerns within NCCSL to prepare for and also handle this new ecumenical situation emerging with the growth of non-traditional Christian groups.

### **Summary**

*The ecumenical situation in Sri Lanka needs prayer for wisdom and discernment. Also, the Sri Lankan political situation invites the ecumenical movement in Norway to join in prayers.*

**The Sri Lankan team** welcomes Catholic and Protestant congregations in Groruddalen, Norway to engage in regular prayers and ecumenical prayer services for the churches in Sri Lanka and for the nation.

**The Sri Lankan team** welcomes the Church of Norway to work – especially through the Christian Council of Norway – for a broader ecumenical interest for Sri Lanka.

**The Sri Lankan team** welcomes churches in Norway to be in continued accompaniment as Sri Lankan churches participate in the struggle for accountability breaking the silence of the national trauma of 2009, as well as in the cry out for an honest and transparent investigation into the Easter attack 2009.

**The Norwegian team** welcomes NCCSL and Caritas/CBCSL to seek ways to a common understanding, position and joint advocacy when the Government starts to roll out programs aiming at national unity and reconciliation.

**The Norwegian team** welcomes initiatives to bring NCCSL Justice and Peace Desk and CBCSL/Caritas Justice and Peace Commission into stronger coordination and cooperation.

**The Norwegian team** welcomes initiatives taken to Catholic-Protestant dialog within the CBCSL Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-Faith – for coordination of interfaith issues, but also for the betterment of Catholic-Protestant relations.

*Enclosure: Oslo Paper – submitted by NCCSL and Caritas Sri Lanka jointly*