

briefing

CSW's support for the work of the National Council of Churches of Nepal

FOR PUBLIC USE

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1. The Principles of CSW's Work Worldwide

Christian Solidarity Worldwide is a human rights charity which specialises in religious freedom, works on behalf of those persecuted for their Christian beliefs and promotes religious liberty for all. We are engaged in work for religious liberty in over 20 countries around the world. In many of these countries the dominance or official adoption of one religion has serious implications for citizens of other faiths. Where Christians are persecuted for their faith, CSW aims to raise awareness within the worldwide Church and international community of religious liberty and human rights abuses; mobilise prayer and action; seek justice and reconciliation; and provide solidarity and encouragement to those suffering for their faith.

While promoting rights based approach to religious freedom, we emphasise the importance of mutual responsibilities in identifying a response and administering justice and reconciliation. The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in claiming protection and freedom of religion for Christians; it is our duty and privilege to do so for people of all faiths, asserting the universality of their application. In practice this can mean negotiating with all who have the power to stifle basic freedoms or to guarantee them, negotiating peacefully with those whose beliefs and policies may be different to our own.

2. The work of the National Council of Churches which CSW applauds and supports

2.1 Ecumenism and acceptance

Our Lord Jesus bids us *“love each other as I have loved you”* (John 15: 12, 17) NCCN is very active in bringing churches together, regardless of denomination, for common concerns and to take joint action. As an ecumenical Christian organization, CSW fully supports inter-denominational Christian dialogue and partnership for common purposes. CSW is pleased to note the large numbers of churches participating in joint meetings in many different regions of Nepal.

NCCN welcomes all Christians in co-operation for spiritual and practical development, and believes in the strengths of combining people of differing talents and insights to work for the purposes of God in Nepal. It sees us as all parts of one body of Christ. The training of pastors and help with leadership capacity-building amongst new churches is the kind of work which builds up the body of Christ when it is so new and inexperienced.

2.2 Faith expressing itself in practice

CSW was founded on the basis of Christians' responsibility to work for the welfare of their brothers and sisters who are suffering in other countries, originally Christians in Communist lands. This requires personal research to establish the truth, speaking out in public about injustices, and taking initiatives to influence those in power so that these injustices are remedied. CSW believes that strong spiritual beliefs in a loving Father and in Jesus' care for the poor must inevitably result in Christians taking action to help those who suffer.

“Let us not merely say that we love each other, but show the truth by our actions” (1 John 3: 18), for *“faith without good deeds is dead”* (James 2: 26). Truly biblical faith must express itself in practical action for the welfare of others. NCCN and its branch Christian Efforts for Peace and Reconciliation (CEPJAR) have taken a lead in showing how Christians can and should express their faith-based convictions in political and social action. NCCN, like CSW, believes

Christians have a vital role to play in conflict-resolution and peace-building. This calls for Christians to play a role as mediators and bridge-builders, bringing various political forces and their leaders to meet, talk and seek resolution of differences. Sometimes this will mean reaching out to hitherto politically unacceptable parties, such as the CPN (Maoist), to persuade them of the benefits of negotiating agreements rather than attempting to impose them by force. This is a controversial line of action, putting its exponents into the line of critical fire from opponents as well as some Christians, but has great potential for good.

2.3 Christians demonstrating positive commitment in political and social action

“I will speak out against those who cheat employees of their wages, who oppress widows and orphans, or who deprive foreigners among you of justice.” (Malachi 3: 5). If God speaks out so loudly and clearly on such political issues, should we, His children, not do the same? NCCN has taken a lead amongst Nepali churches in showing the benefits of Christians becoming active participants in society. Where Christians have in the past rejected the Hindu-dominated rituals such as idol-worship, there has been a danger of rejecting with it the whole culture of Nepal which includes its music, dance, languages and other art forms. CSW sees the strong lead given by NCCN to be part of Nepali culture as a very positive Christian initiative which can move Christians out of the cultural and social sidelines to become positive participants in main-stream society.

This necessitates co-operation with people of other traditions, cultures and faiths for the benefit of the whole community. NCCN's emphasis on being active within Nepali communities opens up a much more positive co-operative role for Christians in a future democratic Nepal. Indeed, it is NCCN's commitment to work to end injustice, poverty, illiteracy, exploitation, and caste-related evils which is seen by CSW as a very potent statement by Christians that they are bringers of Jesus' own light and love and deep sense of justice into the very centre of Nepali's needy society. CSW sees it as vital that Christians are seen to be active in providing education for the poor, medical care for the sick, clean water for those with no access to it, employment for the unemployed, as well as defending the unjustly imprisoned and rescuing and rehabilitating girls trafficked into sexual slavery.

2.4 Creating a positive image for the Christian faith in the media

Prior to the emergence of NCCN, there was a danger for Nepali Christians to be seen as somehow irrelevant to mainstream Nepali society, a little fringe clique who were importing a foreign faith which did not value the culture and society in which it lived. Newspapers, radio and television rarely portrayed Christians in a positive light, if they were mentioned at all. With the explosive growth of the churches in the 16 years since 1990, the people of the new faith could hardly be totally ignored, but they could easily be condemned as only interested in converts, not in justice and democracy.

NCCN's leadership has deliberately sought to involve Christians in speaking out in public and in the media for peace and justice and for peaceful social change. In the last few years, media recognition of the positive role played by Christian leaders has developed dramatically, so that the leader of NCCN has been called to Press Conferences, to participate in televised discussions, and to enter into the role of reporter on human rights as part of the Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (the first time a Christian has been appointed officially to such a position). The overall effect of such active political participation has been to wake-up the media to the presence and potential of the Christians as a force for good in Nepal.

2.5 *Advocating religious liberty and human rights*

Christians have always stood for the principle of the unique value of each human being, in contrast to fatalistic faiths which saw the masses as expendable and the lowest classes and casts (and the female sex) as somehow inferior and of little worth. But without public statement and positive action, this aspect of the Christian faith would be little known in Nepali society. NCCN has made a point of standing alongside those speaking for justice, whatever their faith, and of making clear statements on standards of behaviour, particularly by agents of the state such as the police and army, which must be maintained or are unacceptable.

At times such statements are critical of official actions that have endangered the leaders who took this stand. But NCCN has seen clearly that Christians cannot duck this responsibility if they are to be respected by their neighbours. Speaking out and taking action for justice and for those whose lives are endangered is a truly biblical calling: *“Rescue those who are unjustly sentenced to death. You may say that it is none of your business, but God understands all hearts and judges your motives.”* (Proverbs 24: 11-12).

2.6 *Partnerships across the world: an international vision*

NCCN has put the Christians of Nepal “on the map” internationally, seeing that they are represented at international gatherings of Christians and establishing strong contacts with international organizations such as the Christian Conference of Asia. Not only does that open avenues for experience, wisdom, and new ideas to come to the Nepali churches from outside, but it involves Christians outside Nepal in events and issues within Nepal. Where time is precious, it may seem a loss of valuable working days and weeks for the leader of NCCN to visit USA and Europe to speak to Christians there, such as a visit to the Annual Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

However, the number of Christians who are inspired then to pray and take action for Nepal has unquantifiable potential for benefits which only a loving God can fully appreciate. We will never know how much influence prayer across the world has had in bringing peace to Nepal.

2.7 *Inter-faith dialogue for Justice and Peace*

Most controversial of all NCCN's initiatives has been its commitment to work for Justice and Peace through contacts with leaders of other faiths. Our Lord Jesus was willing to talk personally and at length with people of other faiths, such as the Samaritan woman (John 4: 7-26) and with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7: 25-30). He even praised the faith of a Roman centurion who trusted Him for healing (Luke 7: 2-9) If He was involved in such dialogue, why should His followers fear to?

Through experience in countries such as Indonesia, Nigeria, and Burma, CSW has come to see the urgent necessity for Christians to engage with peaceable leaders of other faiths in search of inter-communal harmony and peace. It must be strongly emphasised that not all Christians are called to participate in this. Only those whose faith is confident and who feel called to it should be involved. Nor is this initiative anything to do with inter-faith worship. It is co-operation and dialogue for specific common purposes: an end to violence, establishing peace, building democracy, establishing and guarding human rights such as religious liberty. These limited but clear objectives can be sought in peaceful dialogue by people of all faiths who are not committed to violence and hatred.

CSW believes strongly that Jesus and his Holy Spirit can work in the hearts of people of every faith, whether they know it is His influence or not. NCCN (through CEPJAR) has given CSW staff the chance to participate on three occasions in meetings with the Inter-Religious Peace group, meetings which were very worthwhile, harmonious, candid and

fruitful. We at CSW applaud this initiative. We see in it no compromise with pagan idolatry, but a God-given opportunity to create harmonious relations for peace and justice in Nepal.

The political events of 2006 appeared to CSW very much to confirm the value of such work, with official recognition of the significance of such efforts culminating in the establishment of the Inter-Religious Council and the appointment of the leader of NCCN as the Vice President of this Council. CSW and NCCN believe that Jesus comes to liberate people from every kind of bondage, materialistic, idolatrous, drug-induced, sexual, caste-related, or any other kind of slavery. We are assured that NCCN has never advocated that Christian converts should retain their former beliefs or the cultural taboos of their previous religion. Christ has freed them from all these.