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SURAT SPIRITUAL DECLARATION

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... FOLLOW UP ...

DECEMBER UPDATES

On 15th December 2003, a meeting was convened in the chamber of the Vice-Chancellor in her chairmanship at 2.30 pm to take forward Project number 2 of the Surat Spiritual Declaration. The meeting was attended by the following members.

1.	Ms. Sudhamahi Regunathan	<i>Vice-Chancellor</i>
2.	Dr. J.R. Bhattacharyya	<i>Registrar</i>
3.	Sh. Vinod Kumar Kakkar	<i>Dy. Registrar</i>
4.	Dr. Anand Prakash Tripathi	<i>Dy. Director and representative of Anurra Samitis</i>
5.	Dr. Bachhraj Dugar	<i>Head, Deptt. Of Non-Violence</i>
6.	Dr. Ashok Kumar Jain	<i>Head, Deptt. Of Jainology</i>
7.	Dr. Hemlata Talesara	<i>Professor</i>
8.	Dr. B.P. Gaur	<i>Asst. Professor</i>
9.	Samani Rijuprajna	<i>Principal, AKK Mahavidyalaya</i>
10.	Sh. Kanhaiyalal Chhajer	<i>Vice President, Jain Vishva Bharati</i>
11.	Sh. Jesraj Sekhani	<i>Amritvani</i>
12.	Sh. Vijay Singh Barmecha	<i>President, Anuvrat Samiti, Ladnun</i>
13.	Sh. Om Prakash Soni	<i>Vice President, Anuvrat Samiti, Ladnun</i>
14.	Sh. Ranjeet Singh Baid	<i>President, Shri Jain Swetamber Terapanthi Sabha</i>
15.	Smt. Suman Nahta	<i>Akhil Bharatiya Mahila Mandal</i>
16.	Sh. Mod. Ayub	<i>Shaher Qazi</i>
17.	Smt. Gulab Rani Bhojak	<i>Chairman, Nagarpalika, Ladnun</i>
18.	Sh. Rajkumar Choraria	<i>President, Akhil Bharatiya Terapan Samiti</i>
19.	Smt. Kalpana Baid	<i>Citizen</i>
20.	Smt. Mamta Dugar	<i>Citizen</i>
21.	Smt. Kiran Devi Barmecha	<i>Citizen</i>
22.	Smt. Pulkumari Dugar	<i>Citizen</i>
23.	Sh. Vishnu Bhojak	<i>Citizen</i>
24.	Ms. Veena Jain	<i>Dy. Registrar (Convenor)</i>

The Vice Chancellor placed before the August gathering the need to embark on the project at two levels.

- 1) Training in living together—harmonial co-existence for which we need to impart training in non-violence.
- 2) Vocational training: With this being the focus, discussions were invited to draw up the modus operandi. Great enthusiasm was shown by all the participants though they also cautioned that the project should consider the reasons why many social development projects have failed and try to address those issues specifically. It was decided that
 - a) an area would be allotted to each of the participating organizations (five Terapan organizations and one under the leadership of Qazi Muhammad Ayub Sahib)
 - b) The University will provide guidance, support through the following sub-committees:
 - i) The area profile and involvement of the local sarpanch: Department of Social Work will be responsible for it. The Anuvrat representation will also be responsible for the above. He will ensure cooperation with the local area leaders.
 - ii) The Department of Non-violence and Science of Living will be responsible for training in harmonial co-existence, that is learning the skills of Non-violence.
 - iii) The Professor of Education and the Dy. Registrar Administration will be in charge of vocational training.

The first set of meetings with the areas leaders, will take place in the first week of January. The department of social work will provide the area profile. In the second week of January, the area leaders with members of the sub committee will meet with the local area representatives like the sarpanch and hold meetings in the selected area. The course of action charted out will differ from area to area and a report of the progress made will be made available every month.

While the above decisions were taken some other major points thrown up during discussions were that an informal NGO structure may be followed for execution of the project.

More people from the town be invited in the project. The project belongs to everybody. Whosoever is willing to take leadership can take the area and support will be given by University.

The University will supply copies of the Surat Spiritual Declaration in Hindi so that they are freely distributed amongst the people. It was also suggested that a meeting may be held in Ladnun town to create awareness of Surat Spiritual Declaration.

For health facilities it was suggested a mobile van be donated to the University by whosoever is able to do so.

... FOLLOW UP ...

LIBERATE CHRISTMAS FROM STEREOTYPES

VALSON THAMPU

Rev. Valson Thampu's call for spirituality across religious frontiers has been ringing loud and clear for some time now. Taking the initiative to actualize the idea, Rev Thampu hosted a Christmas party bringing together people from all other faiths. He endorsed the message of the Surat Spiritual Declaration which was distributed to all those present in the gathering. As per project 1 of the Declaration it was decided to hold monthly meetings in different places, on different religious occasions bringing together people from different faiths. Now we take you along to the party held on 21.12.03...

A happy band of people came together to share and to celebrate the meaning of Christmas in TRACI House, New Delhi on December 21, 2003. They were from diverse faiths and walks of life: Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Arya Samajis, and Christians. There were some very poor and some very rich people there. Also a few celebrities and several very ordinary people. Some were old and some young. The goodly company comprised both women and men: the latter more energetic and eloquent, as is the case these days. But all were equal and at home. All at once the joy of Christmas saturated the air. And ourselves, unawares, beginning to sing, "Joy to the World". Mrs. Mohini Giri, formerly the Chairman of the National Commission for Women, gave the lead and the rest joined her. Soon we found ourselves breaking out into zestful singing. In point of fact, we were neither Hindus, nor Sikhs, nor Jains nor Christians. We were utterly unaware of all labels. We were just children of God, rejoicing in the birth of the Holy Babe.

We did not follow any set order of worship or programme. Sure enough we each had some carols photocopied on sheets of paper. We also had a copy of the Bible. We were free in the presence of God to feel and to do what we liked. A group of young people regaled us with angelic Christmas singing, making us feel that the angelic choir on the first Christmas night could not have done much better. It occurred to us to think that the Christmas event was deliberately and dramatically non-stereotypical. But, sadly, we have turned ruined by stereotypes. Only think of your Christmas Father, no further argument will be needed. Christmas is all about giving. But, by inventing the Santa Claus, we have turned Christmas into an excuse for getting. We all want to get something from Santa; but who among us ever thinks of giving anything at all to poor old Santa? Who pays even a moment's thought to this elderly bearded man, or the reality that hides behind this mask? The informal Christmas message was on "Christmas: a date with the Child". It was the theme that forced into my mind as I sat there, taking in the celebratory ambience in the room. Physical age apart, I found ourselves to be a group of children. And it dawned on me that only those who are children at heart can rejoice in the birth of the Babe. Herod, the adult king, was so unnerved by this event, went mad about it and ordered the massacre of two thousand male children. Rulers go mad when the child in them dies. Jesus said, "Truly, truly I say to you; unless you turn back and become like children you shall in no way enter the Kingdom of God".

The strengths of the child are:

- (a) The child listens. Christmas is all about listening. In the whole of the Nativity story, the human voice is heard rarely. God is speaking and, for a change, humans are listening. That is the exact opposite of what happens in religions. There God is silent and humans are making all sorts of noises. The Babe has come to teach us that it is more blessed to listen than to speak. That alone can eradicate loneliness from this planet. But the whole world is hurting in loneliness because everyone wants to speak and no one wants to listen. The child revels in listening.
- (b) The child is free, especially in the mind. The child is free from stereotypes. Spirituality militates against stereotypes for they amount to inward slavery: the slavery in our minds. There is no trace of the stereotype anywhere in the Nativity Story, which is a spiritual, not religious, event. Stereotypes breed insensitivity, cruelty and hate. They degrade neighbours into enemies and suppress compassion and fellow feeling. Christmas is an invitation to cast out stereotypes of every kind, especially religious stereotypes.
- (c) Finally, the child rejoices in “being with”. The deepest joy of a child is in being with others, especially her parents. The mind of a child is not fractured with hate and alienation. The child is free to “be with” all else. Only a child can transcend caste, creed and colour. Only a child will consent to be born in a cattle-shed, which stands outside of all man-made labels of discrimination and division. Cows vary in colour; but the milk they yield has only one colour.

This brief Christmas message was followed by spontaneous sharing. Barely had I concluded my reflections on the meaning of Christmas, when Mrs. Nandita Bakshi, an ex-bureaucrat, sprang to her feet, her face incandescent with joy and eagerness, to acknowledge her gratitude at being able to attend a Christmas service for the first time in her life. She went on to share with us the joy of being able to intuit the child that God has created all of us to be. Mrs. Mohini Giri, felt that Christmas should be celebrated with the children in the slums and on the streets and, in so doing, pointed to the possibilities for Christmas 2004. Mrs. Ameeta Mullah Wattal, a Kashmiri Pandit and the distinguished principal of Springdales School, Pusa Road, went eloquent about her experiences of studying and growing up in Convent schools and the profound influence that Jesus had and continues to have on her. Ms. Nirmala Deshpande, eminent Gandhian and peace activist, expounded in her short and sweet manner, the meaning of Christmas as well as the message of Jesus Christ. Mrs. Promila Kapoor shared her experiences of the Christian community. Mrs. Sudhamahi Regunathan, the Vice Chancellor of the Jain Vishva Bharati Institute, Rajasthan, acknowledged her personal relationship with Jesus as well as her joy in singing Christmas carols and went on to lead in the singing of a few carols. She shared with us the *Surat Declaration* as a call to inter-religious cooperation and trans-religious spirituality. Brig. Kapoor recalled his wonderful experience during World War II when, on Christmas Day, the guns fell silent all along the African theatre of war. “Jesus silenced the guns; and he has the power to do so,” said the Brigadier.

A couple of hours had passed without our knowing it. The joy of sharing Christmas was so deep and enchanting. It made us decide that our coming together should not be a mere annual event. Jesus came to enable us to come together and to stay together. So we decided that we would continue to meet, say once a month, moving from place to place and consolidate the peace of God which is a divine gift for all mankind. The carol service ended with a prayer for peace in the world, focusing especially on the peace process now afoot between India and Pakistan.