

World Bank's meeting with the world's religions

1998-02

World Bank Press Release

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey and the President of the World Bank, James D Wolfensohn, hosted a Dialogue, "World Faiths and Development" at Lambeth Palace, London, on February 18-19 1998. Leaders from the following nine world Faiths, including the main traditions within the Faiths, participated: Bahai; Buddhist; Christian; Hindu; Jains; Jewish; Muslim; Sikh and Taoist.

The main aim of the Dialogue was to broaden opportunities for common understanding and action in tackling the critical issue of global poverty. It was designed to help the Bank and the Faiths to reach a better understanding of each other's ideas about approaches to development and possible obstacles in the way of achieving desirable development aims. The Dialogue discussed how the criteria applied in development policies might continue to be broadened to include the notion of cultural, religious and social structures and values. This meeting represents an important step towards a new relationship between the World Bank and the Faiths.

[The World Bank press release on the World Faith's Dialogue gives the following biographies for the two Bahá'í participants:]

Kiser Barnes, representing the International Bahá'í Community, Haifa, Israel. Mr Barnes, who holds the position of International Counsellor, is a member of the International Teaching Centre, the body responsible for fostering and monitoring the propagation of the Bahá'í teachings throughout the world. He is a citizen of the United States of America and an attorney. For many years he taught the Law of Corporations and International Economic Law at universities in the Republic of Benin, Togo, and Nigeria, before relocating to Israel in 1993.

Accompanying Mr. Barnes will be Lawrence Arturo, Director of the Bahá'í International Office of the Environment in New York City and Bahá'í Representative to the United Nations on environmental and development issues.

World Bank, religions to swap development ideas

LONDON, Feb 9 (Reuters) - Leaders of nine world faiths are to meet the president of the World Bank in London next week for two days of unprecedented talks on poverty and development policies.

Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey and World Bank President James Wolfensohn said in a statement on Monday they hoped the meeting would foster a better understanding between financiers and religious groups about tackling global poverty.

"The dialogue will discuss how the criteria applied in development policies might continue to be broadened to include the notion of cultural, religious and social structures and values," they said.

"This meeting represents an important step towards a new relationship between the World Bank and the faiths," they added.

The February 18-19 meeting will bring together representatives from the Bahai, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jains, Jewish, Moslem, Sikh and Taoist faiths.

They include the Aga Khan, Crown Prince Hassan of Morocco and Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, vice president emeritus of the World Jewish Congress.

The group will discuss how respect for different cultural values and faiths can be incorporated into development programmes, and the importance of including underprivileged groups.

19:03 02-08-98

Copyright 1998 Reuters Limited. All rights reserved.

World Bank and world's faiths promise to work together

Ecumenical News International
ENI News Service
19 February 1998
ENI-98-0080

By Cedric Pulford

London, 19 February (ENI)--The World Bank and the world's major religions are to establish joint working groups on development issues, it was announced today at the end of a high-level, two-day dialogue at Lambeth Palace, the Archbishop of Canterbury's London headquarters.

Co-chaired by the archbishop, Dr George Carey, and by the World Bank's president, James Wolfensohn, the dialogue brought together leaders of nine world faiths - Bahá'ís, Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Taoists and Christians (represented by Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran and Orthodox - both the Ecumenical and Moscow Patriarchate officials).

The World Bank, which channels billions of dollars in development loans from the rich industrialised countries to the impoverished nations, has been frequently criticised for its policies in recent years by religious leaders, including Archbishop Carey, and by aid organisations. Many have accused the World Bank of ignoring the views of the poorest people in the countries it is trying to help, and of imposing unrealistic and harmful demands for economic reform on governments as a requirement for receiving loans.

Recently the World Bank has been engaged in a major initiative to try to improve its image.

Today, Wolfensohn, a 64-year-old Australian-born American, acknowledged the criticisms and accepted the need for dialogue. He told a press conference at Lambeth Palace: "If we are wrong, let's admit it and deal with it. If we are not, let's get recognition for what we're doing."

Pointing out the seriousness of the dialogue, he said: "This is not Hollywood. It is not a PR [public relations] exercise." World poverty was not decreasing, he said, but the meeting between the bank and the faiths had produced a "unity of concern" for the linkage of physical, spiritual and cultural development.

(The World Bank estimates that almost a quarter of the world's population [23 per cent or 1.3 billion people] live in poverty - on less than US\$1 a day.)

The development subjects selected for the first joint working groups between the faiths and the World Bank are: community building; hunger and food security; environmental sustainability; preservation of cultural heritage; violence and post-conflict reconstruction; education and social services.

The religious communities will also be invited to help prepare the World Bank's annual development reports. The subject for the year 2000 report is Understanding Poverty.

Archbishop Carey, aged 62, who is the spiritual head of the 70 million-strong world-wide Anglican Communion, told the press conference that the success of the meeting had been "the top-down approach of the World Bank meeting the bottom-up approach of the religious communities".

One of the dialogue participants, Bishop Thomas Olmorijoi Laiser, of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, told ENI after the press conference: "The World Bank has made a good start with involving faith communities, but it is important for it to deal with the faiths as such, not individual religions."

He said that in Tanzania - a country divided between Christianity and Islam - the faiths had a disposition to co-operate and World Bank projects could promote this cooperation.

Bishop Laiser referred to World Bank-led structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) which impose economic reforms on national economies and are often criticised for being too harsh on Third World countries. "They [the World Bank] used to introduce these without consulting [the faith communities]. Now I'd expect it to be with consultation."

This gave the faith communities the opportunity to soften the impact of SAPs on the poorest people, he suggested.

Asked by ENI at the press conference why the World Bank had chosen to work through the Anglican Church rather than an ecumenical body like the World Council of Churches, Wolfensohn said: "I don't know. I didn't think I was meeting the Anglican Church, but a group of religious leaders. The archbishop was kind enough to offer [the use of] his 800-year-old palace. He has a record of achievement in this area [development] that none can better."

Archbishop Carey said: "This is not about triumphalism or denominationalism." He added that the continuing activities planned between the bank and the faith communities were not intended to compete with Christian development agencies like Christian Aid and Cafod, two of Britain's prominent charities.

In the past few days, an open letter signed by 13 religious leaders, including Archbishop Carey, was published which expressed concern about "apparent delays" in implementing the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, sponsored by the World Bank, and about "the dilution of its [HIPC's] original promise to provide the most indebted countries with 'the possibility of exiting' from severe indebtedness".

But at today's press conference Dr Carey said the remarks were mainly addressed to finance ministers, rather than to the World Bank.

Despite that and other recent criticisms of the World Bank by Dr Carey, and a recent vigorous rebuttal by Wolfensohn, both men were speaking very much the same language at today's press conference, raising hopes that the World Bank had made a decisive policy shift.

Both men called the dialogue "historic", while Archbishop Carey spoke of "learning together". James Wolfensohn said the two sides in the dialogue would "enrich each other". [851 words]

All articles (c) Ecumenical News International

Reproduction permitted only by media subscribers and provided ENI is acknowledged as the source.

Ecumenical News International

Tel: (41-22) 791 6087/6515 Fax: (41-22) 798 1346

E-Mail: eni@wcc-coe.org

PO Box 2100 150 route de Ferney CH-1211 Geneva 2 Switzerland

RELIGION-DEVELOPMENT: World's Faiths And World Bank Work Together

By Penny Dale

LONDON, Feb 20 (Inter Press Service) - Leading religious leaders from around the globe reached a landmark accord with the World Bank this week, one that aims to put spiritual, moral and social values back into the financial giant's balance sheets.

"This is an historic moment", Wendy Tyndale, a spokesperson for the international development agency Christian Aid, told IPS Friday. "For the first time in the 53 years of its history, the World Bank has opened its doors to dialogue with the faiths."

Working groups between the faiths and the Washington-based financial institution have been set up to discuss how best to ensure projects designed to eliminate poverty consider spiritual, moral and social factors as well as financial ones. The two-day meeting, co-chaired by the head of the Anglican Church, Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey, and the president of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, was held on Feb. 18- 19 at the archbishop's residence in London, Lambeth Palace.

Participants included leading figures from of nine faiths: Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Taoist. They conferred with senior World Bank staff and policy- makers from major British based international aid organisations, including Christian Aid and the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development. The Aga Khan, the spiritual leader or Imam of the Nizaris, the larger of the two main branches of the Ismaili Shi'a community, was also present. The Ismailis have developed a world-wide reputation for charity welfare and development work. In 1967 the current Aga Khan established the Aga Khan Foundation specifically to promote such humanitarian and cultural work.

Over the next 18 months, small working groups will combine people from different faiths working in the community and World Bank officials, and decide the role of the Bank in this new alliance between the churches development network.

"We shall be exploring vital questions about the definition of what constitutes successful development, bearing in mind the importance of religious, cultural, social and environmental aspects of a society's long-

term well being," said Carey in a statement. "We shall consider together, against this background, the kind of criteria which need to be built into effective long-term development policies and projects, and how faith communities and the World Bank might work together to achieve beneficial changes in the fight against world poverty."

The move, initiated by Carey and Wolfensohn over a year ago, has been described by development experts as a major change in World Bank policy. One of the key decisions to have come out of what Carey called "frank and intensive dialogue" was a shift in the bank's understanding of development to include cultural, ethical and spiritual issues, aid agencies here said. "Up until now, the World Bank has ignored the importance of cultural, ethical and spiritual values in development projects because it has focused on economic values alone," said Tyndale.

"Development is, of course, about economics, but, as the churches development network has known for a long time now, culture, spirituality and ethics should not be left out of the development equation either." The World Bank has often found itself at logger-heads with religious-based agencies and experts who have condemned its investment in giant projects that take little account of the needs of ordinary peoples or the social and environmental damage they can cause.

Non-governmental development agencies have attacked many of the bank's policies, including its 'soft' loans at lower rates for developing countries. This, they argue, has sucked the developing world into a spiral of escalating debt, conditional on economic policies not tuned to the needs, cultures, and existing structures in recipient countries. World Bank loans are usually made directly to governments and into large-scale projects, such as the Narmada dam in central India, which displaced thousands of people and caused extensive environmental damage. The bank has faced increasing opposition to such massive projects, and in 1995 pulled out of the billion dollar Arun III dam project in Nepal citing ecological reasons.

"It is a complete change of policy for the bank to now get involved with small-scale community-based projects," Anne Vink of Christian Aid told IPS. Christian Aid welcomes what it sees as a very positive move by the bank, although it still wants to see tangible results.

Wolfensohn was explicit in his intention to go beyond the stage of merely talking, said Tyndale, but also said she would only consider the Lambeth meeting a success if progress could be seen in the place it most matters -- in communities struggling to get out of the trap of poverty. Carey agreed, saying that the dialogue was not a "one-off firework which blazes for a moment and then dies". Another meeting, in an as yet undecided venue, will be held in 18 months time to assess the achievements of the working groups.

The change in Bank policy is attributed to Wolfensohn, who has just started a fresh term as president, during which reportedly hopes to further redirect the Bank's energies. He is reported to be looking several new options, including the work of NGOs.

"The churches network is especially important, because it has worked in developing countries for generations, focusing on community-based, small projects. It has also campaigned rigorously against World Bank policies," Vink added.

The participants agreed to cooperate in terms of research and analysis and the religious communities have been invited by the Bank to provide input to its annual World Development Reports. Their advice, argue leaders of the faiths and development experts, will be particularly useful in influencing the bank's thinking for the year 2000 report, which focuses on the theme 'Understanding Poverty'.

Kiser Barnes, head of the Bahá'í Faith delegation to the event, said the meeting was unprecedented in terms of new collaborative initiatives it has generated.

"Specific spiritual principles, such as the oneness of humanity, equity and justice, and the equality of women and men, which are universal in nature and can be concretely expressed in development endeavours, have a special potential to create a new framework for development," he said.

The Bahá'í International Community is an international non-governmental organisation that represents and encompasses the worldwide Bahá'í community. Composed of more than five million followers of the Bahá'í Faith and established in more than 200 countries and territories, the worldwide Bahá'í community has established more than a thousand small-scale, community-based social and economic development projects. (END/IPS/PD/RJ/98)

Announcement: source and title unknown

Dr George Carey, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Mr James D Wolfensohn, the President of the World Bank, hosted a Dialogue on "World Faiths and Development" at Lambeth Palace, London (the Archbishop's residence), on February 18th-19th 1998, at which the Bahá'í Faith was prominently represented among nine major world Faiths. Other Faith communities represented were Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Taoist. The Bahá'í representatives were Counsellor Kiser Barnes of the International Teaching Center, and Lawrence Arturo, Director of the Bahá'í International Office of the Environment in New York City and Bahá'í Representative to the United Nations on environmental and development issues.

The Dialogue sought avenues for communication and collaboration between the Faiths and the World Bank.

Further information, including the opening and closing statements, press release, agenda, and list of attendees with biographical details, is available on the following Web sites:

The World Bank: <http://www.worldbank.org/html/extdr/faithsdialogue>

Archbishop of Canterbury: <http://www.church-of-england.org/main/lambeth/abchome.htm>