

GENERAL SECRETARY'S REPORT TO THE GENERAL MEETING OF I.A.R.F.

FOR AUG. 1999- JULY 2002

Introduction & Context

My predecessor, Rev. Bob Traer, had given nearly a decade of service and his decision to leave, made in 1999, created as he hoped an opportunity for IARF to re-assess its direction and focus. The transition between us was smoothly managed, and I started work in mid-February 2000.

The other longer-term transition has been the extent to which the whole interfaith environment has continued to evolve. The international and some national "market places" are now relatively saturated with interfaith agencies and initiatives. Specialisation into "interfaith and" peace or development or youth or human rights or ecology has long been apparent.

IARF's name has led us to re-focus sharply on the particular human right, "freedom of religion or belief", with its three pre-conditions: freedom from state interference, interfaith harmony and respect by religions for their own members.

Some governments (notably USA) have picked up the mantle with well-funded religious freedom commissions to pursue their view of the priorities, some of which serve national foreign policy goals. Other countries, notably France but others such as Belgium, Chile, Hungary and China claim to be responding to public opinion against so-called religious "cults or sects". There is also a largely benevolent abundance of good religious freedom websites (including our own), as indicated in the May 2001 edition of "iarf World", as well as literature giving information through world surveys. The problems being: who is able to access it, and/or how to select what is relevant, and then what to do in response.

Serious religious repression remains the hallmark of many regimes, and religious freedom issues are present in some shape or form in most countries.

IARF Strategic Plan 2001-07:

Meanwhile IARF proudly celebrated its Centenary in May 2000, knowing that its original purpose has been broadly accepted amongst a critical nucleus of religious leaders. IARF had become only one of an increasing number of proponents of the interfaith message. There needed to be a large-scale re-assessment, and this took over a year to complete. The Executive Committee commissioned the broadly consultative planning process in Jan. 2000, and the Council adopted the resulting Strategic Plan 2001-07 in March 2001. The main features [with progress to date added] are:

- Articulating an Overall Statement of Purpose with religious freedom at the heart; with three pre-conditions for its achievement [as agreed and published in our literature.] This has now been translated into a new logo emphasising "religious freedom" and a strapline motto "belief with integrity".
- Replacing the Social Service Network with Religious Freedom Projects as the operational basis of IARF's action; [all outstanding commitments to SSN met, and currently 14 RFP projects completed, on-going or identified. See below.]
- Building a wider membership base worldwide; [eligibility for full membership to all faith-based, interfaith or specifically religious freedom organisations. Member

organisations increased from 86 to 103. Several new national chapters are in prospect.]

- Appointing an adequate staff complement at the International Secretariat, Oxford, and in the main regions. [all 7 posts in Oxford = 5.5 full-time equivalents are filled. Regional Coordinator posts: two full-time located in Budapest and Bangalore, one part-time for N. America (on East Coast), three branch coordinators in the different areas of the Philippines; voluntary (rotating) leadership of the Japan Liaison Committee, and one volunteer and one part-time staff person at both the UN locations, Geneva and New York.]

- Identification of programme objectives and broad types; [these are given in the strategic plan. They are also reflected in the 14 RFPs currently identified below.]

- Assumption of a financial expansion, raising the whole profile of expenditure. This also assumes that income will rise once the value of the new programmes is recognised. The transition is underwritten by IARF's reserves. Expenditure can be looked at as three elements: the two types of cost of maintaining IARF (core organisation and programme support which together have increased very significantly), and the potential for project spending which is also much greater. [See the Financial Sectional, below].

IARF Programmes and Projects:

1. RFYN - Religious Freedom Young Adult Network. Under the leadership of the IARF Young Adult Programme Co-ordinator, and as part of the Strategic Plan (2001-07), the aim is gradually to build a network of 200 young people around the world who have knowledge and experience of religious freedom issues. (see 4 below).

2. Religious Education in Schools. Attendance at the Nov. 2001 U.N. Madrid Conference with a delegation at the invitation of the Special Rapporteur, and the production of a booklet of "Ideas and Experiences from around the World" for delegates. There are several opportunities for follow-up which have arisen.

3. Promotion through commemoration of the 20th. Anniversary of the 1981 U.N. Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. A public meeting was held in New Delhi.

4. All-India and International Young Adult Interfaith Project addressed the earthquake damage to a Hindu temple and a mosque in Gujarat. It was sited in a state where a high level of inter-religious tension prevails, with the intention of developing public witness to values of inter-religious tolerance.

5. An initiative on e-learning. In co-operation together the International Interfaith Centre (IIC) and IARF have developed two prototype lessons for consideration at the IARF Congress and also by the International Interfaith Network.

6. Re-launch of the Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the United Nations, Geneva. The IARF staff member was instrumental in this and has become its Secretary.

7. Towards a Voluntary Code of Conduct for all Religious and Belief Communities.

The drafting small committee met in March, a first draft will be before the Congress. This important internationally-funded project is now underway.

8. Small grants to produce or purchase literature to CLAAS (Centre for Legal Assistance & Settlement) and RIEC (Religious Information & Educational Centre). CLAAS published "Faith under Fire" its field research into the religious persecution of Christians in Pakistan. RIEC purchased books on the different faith traditions for its resources library in Hungary.

9. Working to end restrictive and discriminatory legislation in Europe. The IARF Regional Co-ordinator has worked together with Human Rights Without Frontiers, as well as holding a seminar with the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung to highlight the problem.

10. Muslim-Christian dialogue. IARF's representative in Geneva brought together nine scholars and leaders from both traditions in the first of a series of five such encounters covering the major religious traditions.

11. "Freedom of Religion and Belief: Europe's Story" is a substantial new work by a Dutch historian and religious leader. It was commissioned by IARF to promote understanding of how this human right emerged through European history. Much effort has gone into making history readable and relevant to today.

12. The 31st IARF World Congress in Budapest, together with its Young adult Programme, is a major investment to engage our constituency and others. The aim is to create a momentum for work on religious freedom work of the types covered by the six thematic topics of the lectures and workshops.

13. Southern Philippines: Young Adult Educational Tour for approximately 25 Muslims and Indigenous Peoples, originating in Mindanao and including the Visayas region over a period of 8 days. This is currently approved and is being organised.

14. Indigenous Peoples' Beliefs and Religious Education in Schools. This is the current direction under consideration by the IARF branches in the Philippines following the visit of the General Secretary in November 2001. IARF sponsored a specific consultation with the ten main indigenous people's tribes in Cotabato District, Mindanao.

Financial Implications:

The Hon. Treasurer's report will be before the General Meeting. The IARF decided to move forward decisively at a time when the financial environment was positive and its assets were increasing in value overall. The position was that the charity's assets had been stable over the period 1998 & '99 and slightly increased in 2000 to £ 485 K.

There is now a marked change in the economic climate after September 11th. 2001, added to which the stock-market has failed to recover owing to then unrecognised but now persistent, other negative factors.

IARF had however already committed itself to move forward with the appointment

of the necessary staff and the design of programmes and projects, both of which are an investment in a vision of the organisation's future engagement. IARF's funds are committed up front to religious freedom work. This Congress is likewise designed to encourage new work and personal initiatives throughout the IARF's membership.

There is however a fundamental need to balance the books in the medium term, and this will be the substantial responsibility of the new International Council and its Executive Committee. (The latter will meet this November - when the financial cost of this Congress will also be known.)

Membership: Our membership policy has widened eligibility for full membership to faith-based, interfaith or specifically religious freedom organisations which accept the prevailing Voluntary Code of Conduct. Associate Membership continues for those interested in IARF's objectives but where full membership is not appropriate because of their overall priorities, or geographical or other limitations. Applicants must also be acceptable to the International Council which retains the right to exercise its own discretion on all matters of membership. In 1999, membership of both Full and Associate Member Organisations was at 86 (including 31 Associate Members) in 27 countries, in ten of which there were IARF chapters. In mid-2002, the overall figure is 103 Member Organisations (34 of Associate status). A Thailand chapter has been added, and two other chapters are in the process of formation.

There has been the constraint of available administrative time to bring the database fully up to date, to check that all the addresses on the list represent organisations whose membership lists, reports and subscriptions are fully up to date. We have to predict that some loss of interest and lapses will become apparent as we tidy up our administration between August 2002 and the Council in March 2003.

Finally, the use of the Internet to attract and draw in new membership will require a very carefully thought through strategy and administrative plan. This has not yet been adequately investigated.

Overall, IARF's member organisations will need to be clear whether they value the changes to IARF, its focus and level of activities, and how they can be sustained.

In conclusion, we are coming to a cross-roads for IARF. Can we sustain the structure and staffing necessary for significant programmes of action on the issues of religious freedom internationally, nationally and locally?

Andrew C. Clark.
General Secretary.
Oxford 15th. July 2002