

Rally seeks unity among religious groups

Diversity rally may head off interfaith tension.



Christian and Evangelical churches organized a rally for unity in Colombo

An inter-denominational rally was staged in Colombo recently in a bid to bring the nation's Christians closer together.

As well as being a celebration of diversity, some observers believe the event may have had an underlying agenda: to calm tensions that have arisen lately and which could escalate in future over forced conversions.

Thousand of believers, including Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, members of the Ceylon Reformed Church and evangelical groups, joined in worship and song at the city's main Anglican church, the Cathedral of Christ the Living Savior, on June 25.

"This is a dream we have been dreaming for years. Christian unity will be the best gift we can give to the coming generations," Presbyterian Pastor Piyadasa told the gathering.

He added that diversity is both beautiful and essential. "It would be great if we can keep our denomination in second place and give first place to our position as children of one God," he said.

His views were echoed by Father Sydney Knight, an Anglican vicar. "We have to learn from other religions because Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims are united. Ours is the one which is divided," he said.

“Unless we are united we don’t have a message to the world. We can’t say ‘love one another’ without living with one another.”

The participants watched video coverage of a major inter-faith rally in Paris held in 2009, in which a Vatican representative also delivered a strong message on the need for unity. Cardinal Walter Kasper, president emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, told the Paris gathering that until there was “unity among different Christian denominations, there would be no lasting peace or justice in the world.”

A number of Christian leaders and Buddhist monks have expressed suspicions that evangelical churches have been involved in unethical conversions. Now the Jathika Hela Urumaya, a predominantly Buddhist party, is steering a bill through parliament which would outlaw the practice.

The Prohibition of Forcible Conversions of Religion Bill would make it illegal to offer cash or any other material incentive to convert a person from one religion to another. If passed, the bill will make the offense punishable with up to seven years imprisonment and a fine of 500,000 rupees (about US\$4,400).

Some Sri Lankan Catholics have voiced concerns that this could lead to dissent, not only between Christian faiths but between Christians and Buddhists.

Catholic Father Benedict Joseph may have been making an oblique reference to the issue when he said at the event, “there is a difference between unity and uniformity. The Church is not to be involved in cookie cutter Christianity and unity is not brought about by mechanical restrictions and regulations.”