

# **REPORT OF THE ACTIVITIES OF APFC FROM 2005 TO 2009**

## **Introduction**

Andhra Pradesh Federation of Churches (APFC) is the regional ecumenical forum in the State of A.P. It is an umbrella organization of the Churches of various Christian Denominations and a state-level body of the Bishops and Heads of Churches in A.P. representing the Christian Community in the State. It is fostering the ecumenical fellowship of the Churches and Dioceses of the Catholic, CSI, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Mennonite, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventist, Pentecostal and other Churches. Though the *Andhra Pradesh Federation of Churches* (APFC) was functioning from 2005, under the nomenclature of *Andhra Pradesh Christian Federation*, it was registered as a Society under the A.P. Registration of Societies Act (ACT 35 of 2001) only on 30-01-2008 with regd. no. 89 of 2008.

***The aim and object of the APFC:*** To represent the A.P Christian Minority before the Government and the public and to promote the over all development of the Christian Community by achieving progress in the social, economic, political, educational, cultural and religious fields.

## **2. Main activities of the APFC:**

- Efforts on extending the SC status to the Dalit Christians
- Resolving the problems of the Church-run educational institutions
- Protesting against the killings of the pastors and attacks on Christians in our State and other States like Orissa and Karnataka
- Efforts on extending the SC status to the Dalit Christians
- Opposing the imposition of government board on Church properties
- Lobbying with the Government on the rights of Christian Minority and freedom of religion
- Advocacy with the political parties on political empowerment of Christian Community
- Collaboration in ecumenical and interfaith programmes
- Networking with social organisations

## **3. Some of the achievements of the APFC:**

- Making the Chief Minister to write to the Prime Minister and Smt. Sonia Gandhi to introduce the Bill in the Parliament for amending the Constitutional (S.C.) Order 1950 and lead a Christian delegation to the Union Ministers
- Getting the CID investigation ordered into all the atrocities on Christians in A.P.
- Stopping of the take over of the Church properties by the Government board
- Getting a separate wing for Christian Minority in the Minorities Welfare Department
- Achieving a separate A.P. Christian Finance Corporation (APCFC)
- Obtaining subsidy for the pilgrimage to the Holy Land from the Government
- Orders obtained to identify and assign lands for the Christian cemeteries

## **4. Important Meetings of the APFC:**

- **First Managing Committee Meeting** of APCF was held on August 30, 2005, set up a Core Committee to respond immediately to issues and represent to the Government.
- **Second Managing Committee Meeting** of APCF was held on February 1, 2006, approved constituting various state committees and the district units of APCF.
- **Coastal regional APCF Meeting** was held in Bishop's House (APSSS), Eluru, on April 18, 2006
- **Core Committee meeting** was held in Archbishop's House, Secunderabad, on August 11, 2006
- **APFC Annual Issue was released by Hon. Chief Minister:** Dr. Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy, released the Annual Issue-2006 of the APFC, earlier known as the Andhra Pradesh Christian Federation, at the High tea hosted by him on the eve of Christmas in the Jubilee Hall, Public Gardens, Hyderabad, on December 21, 2006.
- **The meeting of APFC and the Fellowship Meet of the Bishops**, took place on September 14, 2007, at St John's Regional Seminary, Hyderabad, where it was decided that *the Andhra Pradesh Federation of Churches (APFC)* must be an independent State level body exclusively of the Bishops and Heads of Churches without any structural tie up with APBC, APCC or any other organisation. It was also decided to register the APFC as a society without further delay.
- **APFC General Body Meeting** was held on March 06, 2008, at 04.00 p.m. at St. John's Regional Seminary, Hyderabad, focusing on its organizational matters and other issues of the Christian community.
- **State Convention of Church Leaders** was convoked by APFC on March 7, 2008, at HASSS, Secunderabad, with about 100 delegates from many districts of the State. The purpose of the Convention was to plan for setting up of the District Councils of APFC and to discuss the issues of the Christian Community.
- **APFC Managing Committee Meeting** was held on Sept. 05, 2008 at St John's Regional Seminary, Hyderabad, which focused on the denial of minority rights by the A.P. Government to the Christian Minority.
- **APFC State Action Committee Meetings: The first meeting** of APFC State Action Committee consisting of senior pastors and eminent Christian leaders was held on October 13, 2008 at the Archbishop's House, Secunderabad. **The second meeting** of the APFC State Action Committee took place on November 06, 2008, at the same venue in which by Bro. M. Anil Kumar, President of Anil World Evangelism and the A.P. Pastors' and Christian Leaders' Fellowship, gave an address.
- **APFC State Advisory Council (SAC) Meeting** was on December 11, 2008, at HASSS, Secunderabad, in which about 50 senior clergy / pastors and prominent lay leaders from various fields deliberated on the formation of APFC District Action Committees and other matters affecting the Christian community in the State.
- **The APFC General Body and Managing Committee** meetings were held on March 04, 2009 at St. John's Regional Seminary, Hyderabad, in which among other matters the criteria for the admission of the new members was finalized.
- **The APFC Managing Committee meeting** was held on August 28, 2009 from 11.30 a.m. to 01.30 p.m. at St. John's Regional Seminary, Hyderabad, which mainly discussed about holding a Dalit Christian Maha Sabha for demanding SC status for the Christians of SC origin.

## **5. Efforts and Struggles of the APFC**

### **5.1. Movement for Dalit Christian Rights**

The APFC has been urging the Central and State Governing and contacting the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC), National Commission for Minorities (NCM), A.P. State Commission for SC & ST (APSCSCST), and the A.P. State Minorities Commission (APSMC) to do the needful to provide S.C. status to the Dalit Christians. The APFC supports the efforts of its affiliate United Front for Dalit Christian Rights (UFDCR), the National Council of Dalit Christians and the CBCI-NCCI Coordination Committee.

- On December 31, 2007, an ecumenical delegation led by Archbishop M. Joji met Dr. Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, and presented the memorandum of the Andhra Pradesh Federation of Churches (APFC) pointing out the undue delay on the part of the Congress led UPA Government in rectifying the Constitutional anomaly underlying the Constitution Order 19 of 1950. As promised in the meeting, the Chief Minister of A.P. wrote a letter dated 09-02-2008 to the Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and Smt. Sonia Gandhi, the UPA Chairperson, urging them “to take immediate action in this regard.”
- On March 12, 2008, Archbishop Marampudi Joji along with Rev. Fr. Dr. Anthoniraj Thumma and Sri T. Stanley Babu IRTS (Retd), met Sri N. Chandrababu Naidu, the President of Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in his residence at Hyderabad and sought the support of TDP on the issue.
- A meeting was organized by APFC to plan a strategy for obtaining the SC Status to the Dalit Christians HASSS, Secunderabad, on May 29, 2008 which honourable Members of Parliament Sri Harsha Kumar and Sri J. D. Seelam shared their views.
- The APFC held a meeting with Hon. Chief Minister Dr. Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy on June 06, 2009 and insisted on pursuing the Dalit Christian issue. As agreed in the meeting, he took a Christian delegation from the State led by Archbishop M. Joji, the Executive Vice-President of APFC and Secretary to APBC, to the Union Ministers to press for the SC Status to the Dalit Christians. On June 19, 2009, in the morning, along with the Chief Minister the delegation met Shri Veerappa Moily, Union Minister for Law and Justice, at his residence in New Delhi. On the same day, late evening, the Chief Minister took the delegation to Shri Mukul Wasnik, Union Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment, at Shastri Bhavan, New Delhi.
- APFC facilitated Christian Leaders’ Conference that was held on June 26, 2009 at the APBC Centre, Secunderabad. The purpose on this consultation meeting was to deliberate upon the proposal to hold a Dalit Christian Maha Sabha to press for the long pending demand of SC status to the Dalit Christians.
- The APFC delegation met Hon. Chief Minister Dr Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy on Aug. 28, 2009 and thanked him for getting the resolution passed in the Legislative Assembly on Aug. 25, 2009 requesting the Government of India to extend the SC status to the Christians of Scheduled Caste origin. He also consented to be the Chief Guest in the Dalit Christian Maha Sabha and agreed to invite the Prime Minister for the same.

- Preparations are going on to participate in the Dalit Christian Rally and Dharna to be held in New Delhi on Nov. 18, 2009. The APFC is continuing its pressure on the Government to introduce the Bill in the Parliament.

## **5.2. Agitation against the morphed image of Jesus**

On Sunday July 13, 2008, Telugu daily *Sakshi* published a morphed image of Sacred Heart of Jesus. The morphed image of Lord Jesus led to wide spread protests by the readers and others particularly Christians cutting across the Denominations. Fr Dr Anthoniraj Thumma, the Executive Secretary of APFC, contacted the editorial team of *Sakshi* who rendered an unconditional apology. He contacted the originator of the image and got it removed from his website as it was also being published elsewhere.

## **5.3. Opposing the Ban on Propagation of other Religions**

On May 24, 2007, the A.P. Government promulgated the Andhra Pradesh Propagation of Other Religions in the places of Worship or Prayer (Prohibition) Ordinance 2007. It empowered the State to prohibit propagation of other religions in particular places of worship or prayer than the religion traditionally practised there. The same Ordinance was passed as Act No. 24 of 2007 on August 9, 2007 in the Legislative Assembly. Under the Ordinance /Act, two Government Orders, both dated 02-06-2007 were issued by Revenue (Endowments III) Department. The G.O. Ms. No: 746 imposes ban on the propagation of other religions in Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD), and G.O. Ms. No: 747 in other nineteen temple towns. These GOs jeopardize the fundamental rights of the Non-Hindu citizens and are provoking more attacks by Sangh Parivar on the Christians and pastors. APFC got the Bill opposed in the Assembly by lobbying with the Opposition Parties and getting their support. Later, the APFC made representations to the Chief Minister to get the GOs rectified and he ordered the officials to look into the matter. On the request of the APFC, the NCM wrote to the Government of A.P. in 2008 to amend the GOs which is yet to be done. The APFC is pursuing the matter with the new minister for Endowments who took over in June 2009.

## **5.4. Protest against the Bill on Christian Property Board**

The resolute protest staged by the Churches in Andhra Pradesh resulted in the State Government putting the draft Bills on Christian Property Board in the cold storage. In the five Regional Workshops conducted by the Minority Welfare Department in Hyderabad on 04-12-2007, in Visakhapatnam and Vijayawada on 06-12-2007, and in Kadapa and Nizamabad on 12-12-2007, the Churches unitedly and forcefully expressed their disapproval of the Draft Bills. After much lobbying with the Government and many representations by the APFC, finally the Chief Minister conceded not to impose the legislation if the Churches did not want it. On the eve of Christmas, he assured the Churches that the Government would not bring about any Bill relating to the Christian Community without first consulting the Church elders and the stake holders, and without arriving at a consensus and understanding with them.

## **5.5. Condemning the Serial Terrorist Bombings**

The Secretary issued a Press Statement on 19-05-07 condemning the bomb blasts and the police firing that took place at the Mecca Masjid, Hyderabad, on May 18, 2007 and appealed for calm and religious harmony. He addressed a Press Conference organised by the Inter Faith Forum, Confederation of Voluntary Agencies (COVA), and Civil Society Organisations on 20-05-07. He also met the Chief Minister on 22-05-07 along with same groups and asked him to grant adequate compensation to the families of the victims and order a CBI enquiry into the whole incident. The Commission also gave a Press Statement condemning the serial bomb blasts that took place in the Lumbini Park and Kokul Chat restaurant in Hyderabad on 25-08-07. The Secretary attended a meeting of Civil Society Groups and Inter Faith Forum at the Jammata-e-Islami Hind office, Hyderabad, held on 30-08-07 which resolved to approach the Government to initiate steps to prevent such terrorist attacks in the future and to take up CBI investigation on the attacks without harassing the innocent Muslim youth.

### **5.6. Demand for CID inquiry on the Killings of Pastors**

The Christian community in A.P. which had been distressed by the killings of many of its pastors was once again shocked by the brutal killing of Fr. Thomas Pandippally CMI on August 16, 2008 near Yellareddy in Nizamabad Dt. On August 22, 2008, Archbishop M. Joji and APFC delegation held a meeting with Chief Minister Dr. Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy on the matter in his camp office. At the State Capital an ecumenical candle lit demonstration was staged on the Tank Bund on August 24, 2008 evening by thousands of Christians. The Chief Minister ordered a state level CID inquiry into the killing of Fr. Thomas and other pastors and into all the atrocities perpetrated on the Christians in the State. The State Home Minister Sri K. Jana Reddy held a meeting on 22-09-2008 with APFC delegation on the matter in his Chambers along with the top police officers and ordered for a SIT to investigate the murders of Fr. Thomas and other pastors and attacks on Christians. A delegation led by Fr Dr Anthoniraj Thumma, the APFC Executive Secretary, met Smt. Sabitha Indira Reddy, the Minister for Home Affairs, on August 03, 2009 requesting her to review the CID investigation of the murder of Rev. Fr. Thomas Pandippally and the killings of other pastors in the State.

### **5.7. Demonstration against the Orissa Carnage**

At the call given by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), APFC and other Christian organisations, thousands of Christian educational institutions remained closed on August 29, 2008 to protest against the communal riots and atrocities on the Christians in the State of Orissa. In the capital city of Hyderabad, thousands of teachers gathered at St. Mary's High School grounds, Secunderabad, for an *Inter-Faith Prayer Meeting* in the forenoon of the same day in which Sri Harcharan Singh Josh, Member of the National Commission for Minorities (NCM), and Sri Yusuf Qureshi, the Chairman of A.P. State Minorities Commission (APSMC) promised to take up matter. A *massive Peace Rally* of about 10, 000 people was held on October 19, 2008, in Hyderabad which culminated in a public meeting. The memorandum of resolutions passed at the public meeting was submitted to Governor Shri N. D. Tiwari on the following day.

### **5.8. Representation to the National Commission for Minorities**

The APFC presented a Memorandum to the Sri Michael P. Pinto, Vice-Chairperson of the National Commission for Minorities (NCM), during his visit to Hyderabad along with three other Members of NCM on Feb. 4 -5, 2008. Sri M. P. Pinto and Sri Harcharan Sigh Josh, the Member of NCM, along with Sri Yusuf Qureshi, the Chairman of APSMC, called on Archbishop M. Joji, in the Archbishop's House on Feb. 5, 2008 and assured him of taking up these issues with the Government. After few days "Report of the four-member NCM team's visit to Hyderabad" was sent by the NCM to the Government of A.P. asking them to rectify the GOs 746 and 747, and to desist from setting up a Christian property board.

### **5.9. Creation of A.P. State Christian Finance Corporation**

The Christian Minority in the State, led by the APFC, had been demanding a separate Department and Finance Corporation which was finally accepted by the Government. APFC delegation led Archbishop M. Joji reminded the Chief Minister about it on July 12, 2008 in his Camp Office. Finally, the A.P. State Christian Finance Corporation (APSCFC) was established on Nov. 13, 2008. The APFC delegation led by Archbishop M. Joji, the Executive Vice-President of APFC, during its meeting with Hon. Chief Minister Dr. Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy on June 06, 2009 submitted a memorandum to him requesting for assignment of a plot of land in Secunderabad to construct office facilities for the APSCFC and to set up a Christian Community Center. He accepted the request favorably and initiated the process in this regard. Again on July 21, 2009, the delegation met the Hon. Chief Minister and requested him to issue instructions to sanction lump some amount 15% of the state budget for the Minorities (in proportion to the Christian population among the Minorities) under separate head allocated for the purpose by the Finance Dept. As a result, about Rs. 31.80 Crores was sanctioned for APSCFC for various welfare schemes including Scholarships, construction and repairs of church buildings, self-employment programmes for youth and SHGs, Christian Mass Marriages, and Christian Pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Presently, the schemes for assisting the pilgrimage to the Holy Land and the construction of churches are stayed by the A.P. High Court.

### **5.10. Participation in General and State Elections 2009**

The APFC played its role well in the last General and State elections held in April 2009. "A Charter of demands of the Christian Minority" in the State was circulated to the political parties, social organisations and to the press and media. Some of them, like the demand for SC status to the Dalit Christians, were included in the election manifestoes of the parties. Political parties were asked to give seats to the Christian candidates and the faithful were urged to perform their duty and exercise their franchise without fail. Under the leadership of Archbishop M. Joji, the Executive Vice-President, a list of about 20 new Christian Congress candidates was prepared and presented to Hon. Chief Minister Dr. Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy on March 02, 2009 in his Camp Office. Among them, nearly 10 candidates, including Dr. K. Jayasudha (candidate for Secunderabad Assembly Constituency), who were present at this meeting were introduced to the Chief Minister. Lobbying for seats was continued in Hyderabad as well as New Delhi. Similarly Archbishop M. Joji also introduced the candidates who wished to contest from the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) to Sri. N. Chandrababu Naidu, President of TDP.

### **5.11. Memorial Service for Dr Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy**

The sudden demise of Chief Minister Dr. Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy on September 02, 2009 in a helicopter crash left the Christian community in the State in a great shock. The APFC along with the Archdiocese of Hyderabad organised a Memorial Service to pay homage to him on Sept. 05, 2009 and participated in the Condolence Meetings organized by the Pastors' Fellowships and other ecumenical organisations.

## **Conclusion: Challenges and Opportunities**

Through the inspiration and strength of the Holy Spirit the ecumenical movement in A.P. has come a long way and is on progress. Apart from the formation of Andhra Pradesh Federation of Churches (APFC), a few state level ecumenical organisations of the Christian leaders, alliances of Christian political activists and fellowships of pastors have emerged in the State. Some issue-based groups are also active at various levels. At times there is unhealthy competition among them. The ego problems and personality clashes of the leaders of the Christian organisations result in conflicts. The mainline Churches face the challenge of the numerous independent Churches of the Pentecostal and Evangelical origin that have mushroomed in every nook and corner. The attacks on the pastors and the Christians by the Hindu fanatic groups are increasing as the number of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ is growing. The educational services and other ministries by the Churches also face some difficulties. The common witness and service by the Churches need to be strengthened as the good name and image enjoyed by them is on the wane. In general the mass media in the State does not seem to be sympathetic to the Christian community. These are some of the challenges and opportunities prevailing in the State to which the APBC Commission for Ecumenism and the APFC must keep responding with the discernment and fortitude of the Holy Spirit.