

A MESSAGE FROM THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

I am very happy to have been invited to commend the newly formed Network for Inter-Faith Concerns (NIFCON) and this, the first of its planned six-monthly Newsletters.

The background to the Network is as follows: Resolutions 20 and of the 1988 Lambeth Conference urged each Province of the Communion to promote dialogue with people of other faiths. While recognising that such dialogue is not a substitute for evangelism, Resolution 20 suggested that it could help "people of different faiths to make common cause in resolving issues of peace-making, social justice and religious liberty".

Resolution 21 suggested that ACC consider the appointment of an Inter-Faith Committee which among other things would endeavour to establish "a common approach to people of other faiths on a Communion-wide basis".

NIFCON is the first step in putting these very important Resolutions into effect. It will be based at the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham, UK. Its part-time Convenor for the first three years will be the Revd Nigel Pounce. His first task will be to establish a network of correspondents in the 34 Provinces of the Communion and the United Churches of South Asia. The hope is that these correspondents will be people who are already actively involved in collecting information about Inter-Faith matters - both positive stories which can serve as models for others, and the painful accounts of difficulty - and sometimes active persecution - which can both stimulate our prayers and constantly remind us that the way of dialogue is never easy and not always possible or appropriate.

This information will form the basis of the Newsletter and will be vital for the work of NIFCON. It is important for us to recognise that within our Communion there exists a wide variety of Inter-Faith situations and a wide range of theological approaches which cannot always be easily reconciled. NIFCON will reflect these differences openly and honestly and the Newsletter will provide a forum in which they can be discussed.

My hope is that in this way the work of NIFCON will both be important in its own right, and also that it will enable us all to do some thinking so that we can give these matters a high priority in the life of our Communion.

I therefore commend this important new initiative to you for your support and your prayers.

LAMBETH 1988 - RESOLUTION 20: INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE

This Conference commends dialogue with people of other faiths as part of Christian discipleship and mission. with the understanding that:

- 1) dialogue begins when people meet each other;
- 2) dialogue depends upon mutual understanding, mutual respect and mutual trust; 3) dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community
- 4) dialogue becomes a medium of authentic witness.

Acknowledging that such a dialogue, which is not a substitute for evangelism, may be a contribution in helping people of different faiths to make common cause in resolving issues of peace-making, social justice and religious liberty, we further commend each province to initiate such dialogue in partnership with other Christian Churches where appropriate.

NIFCON - The Inside Story

At the beginning of 1992 I was asked by my Bishop to become involved with a group chaired by Canon Sam van Culin aimed at implementing Lambeth Resolution 20 (see box above).

It was early agreed that a Network of "correspondents" could be set up more readily than establishing any official structure. These correspondents will be people already involved in the collection of information about Inter-Faith affairs. A twice-yearly newsletter could keep them and others in touch with each other.

Those simple aims took time to be sharpened up into Resolution 23 of the Joint Meeting of the Primates and the Anglican Consultative Council in Cape Town, South Africa, in January 1993 which officially launched NIFCON.

My appointment as Convenor is very much part-time. In "gifting" me to the Communion to do this task, my Diocese of Lichfield envisaged it means one day a week. For the first three months much time was occupied in seeking to raise the budget necessary to do the job. That has been achieved for the first year, though money is needed for the following two years. From the beginning of this year I have secretarial assistance for half a day a week in the person of Mrs Linzee Perry.

So NIFCON's aims must be realistic and not over-ambitious. My personal prayer is that by building up a Network of correspondents across the world- in very different situations we can encourage one another in our work of Christian discipleship and mission. For so many of us, sometimes in the most unlikely of places, there can be a daily meeting with people of other faiths. What we do with such a meeting cannot be marginalised in our concern for what we may argue are more pressing needs in our ministry.

So my hope for NIFCON NEWS is that we shall be able to share stories about people and situations - some will be joyful, some will be painful. We need to share both the joy and the pain if we are to support one another across the Communion. We shall need to respond in prayer, but also perhaps by way of very practical suggestions. We shall need to listen to angry voices as well as prophetic voices. We have to be ready to do some hard theological thinking and be prepared to love and care for sisters and brothers, even when we cannot fully understand their situation, which may be so different from ours.

Of course, all this will depend on YOU. In this first issue of NIFCON NEWS we hear several stories about Inter-Faith encounter from around the world. Those who write are sharing their own understanding and perspective. They write for themselves, not as any kind of official representatives. But this first issue is being mailed to all Bishops of the Communion and the United Churches of South Asia. It's also being sent to those we know already will be the "correspondent" in their Province or Diocese and to others who share our concerns. Please pass on your copy of NIFCON NEWS to others who may be interested. Encourage them to be in touch with us. I look forward to hearing from you.

The Revd Nigel Pounce is Team Vicar of St Chad's Church, Wolverhampton, in the Diocese of Lichfield. Wolverhampton is a multi-faith town in the English West Midlands and Nigel doubles as parish priest and adviser to the Bishop on Inter-Faith concerns. He was ordained in 1972 and served in Portsmouth and Chichester Dioceses before going to work as a parish priest in the Diocese of West Malaysia from 1980 to 1986.

Mauritian Concerns

Roger CHUNG PO CHUEN is an Anglican priest. He has been ordained to the ministry for 10 years and served at St Paul's Church, Plaineverte, in a Muslim area of Mauritius. He is now studying for a postgraduate Diploma in Mission at the Sell/Oak Colleges. Married to Alice, he has two sons.

Mauritius has a population of just over one million people. The Mauritian society is woven from many cultural threads: Indian, African, European and Chinese. This has produced a heady brew of races, languages and religions. The population is 46% Hindu, 34% Christian, 17% Muslim, the balance being Buddhists, Baha'i, etc. The Anglican population is around 7000, ie 2% of Christians yet the largest of the non-Roman Catholic denominations.

All the Mauritians speak Creole but English is the official language. French is also widely used between the communities due to the French influence before 1810. French culture is very strongly felt as the island of Reunion, a French territory, diffuses its Radio and Television programmes to Mauritius. It is in this unique setting that Inter-Faith encounters take place.

Major conflict arose between Christians of African descent and Muslims during the independence era in Mauritius. There was much bloodshed at that time in 1968. Both Christian and Muslim people had to flee from certain regions of the capital city suburbs. Now 25 years have elapsed and reconciliation has taken place.

Strictly speaking, there is no direct or official Inter-Faith dialogue but at grassroots levels where people meet daily in society there is a great deal of tolerance. The Church and other religious leaders always gather together to pray at special events whenever the country's needs are at stake or on occasions of national celebration. Temples, Mosques and Churches are to be found all over the island. Inter-Faith marriages are common between all the races and linguistic groups.

However, the impact of the outside world and rapid industrialisation of Mauritian society has changed the traditional setting. Material affluence and women going out of the home into paid employment have disturbed and unsettled what was a rather conservative Mauritian way of life.

Factories producing profitable textile products for export have very long working hours. The normal weekly working hours demanded per worker is 45, These are usually from 7.30 am to 5.15 pm Monday to Friday. However, they may also be required to do weekend work and many workers anyway want to earn overtime money. Christians, Hindus and Muslims working in such physically taxing jobs inevitably find little time for regular religious activities outside the home. Regular attendance at Temple, Church and Mosque- has inevitably declined.

The up and coming leisure and communications industries like video film facilities have impinged very western, American ways of thinking into the fabric of Mauritian culture. Crime rates have increased and drug addiction have spread to all strata of society.

So, as secularisation and materialism draw people away from their traditional culture and the practice of their faith, the importance of Inter-Faith dialogue for Mauritius has become clear.

New Zealand

Population 3,400,000, mostly secularised or nominally Christian: 28% Anglican, 24% Presbyterian, 15% Roman Catholic, 5% Methodist; tiny populations of Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Sikhs (totaling under 1% of population). Muslims are the most numerous group, say 5000, comprising largely communities of fijian Indians, Malaysians, Gujeratis. No denomination maintains any on-going dialogue with any other religion, though there has been fairly regular Christian-Jewish discussion in Auckland and recent Inter-Faith work for world peace (particularly in Wellington).

The Revd Raymond Oppenheim MA BD - Vicar of Lower Hutt, Diocese of Wellington - is sometime member of the Provincial Commissions on Ecumenism and Doctrine and the Negotiating Churches Unity Council. He is a/so part of Unit Three Core Group: Conference of Churches in Aotearoa - New Zealand. He writes on...

Christian-Muslim Dialogue in New Zealand

At the time of the "Rushdie Affair", I was serving as the Anglican Representative on the Unit Three Core Group of the Conference of Churches in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Part of our mandate was Inter-Faith relations. I suggested that we might contact the Muslim leadership, as their national office was nearby, in Wellington. After much debate, it was decided to contact them, requesting a meeting. Our message was simply that "we can see this book (The Satanic Verses) has upset you, but we do not understand why. We would like you to tell us, so that we can explain the situation to our denominations".

The Core group debated the prerequisites for such a dialogue. Our Conference has firmly stated goals, advocating equality of women and men. Did we have the right to insist that Muslims adhere to our goals? Could we insist on equality of the sexes within their delegation? And what about youth spokespersons? After much soul-searching, we decided we could not make any demands on our Muslim counterparts.

As we had no experience of the local Muslim community, we did not know what to expect. Would they be elderly, fierce-eyed mullahs? Would there be any women, and, if so, would they be submissive in the presence of men?

We chose our initial meeting place very carefully – the strictly neutral offices of the *Alliance-Francaise*. We arrived first, set out the tea and biscuits which we thought would probably conform to Muslim dietary rules, and waited tensely. They arrived, obviously as tense as we were. Introductions were made and the discussion began.

Fortuitously, the mosque in Lautoka, Fiji, had just been bombed – supposedly by Methodist extremists. We had something to talk about, besides Rushdie. Much to our relief, and theirs, no one appeared to be out to score points. Both sides were cautious. The Muslims had brought a spokesperson – a high-ranking bureaucrat from the New Zealand Ministry of Education, Bangladeshi and devoutly Muslim. He spoke a great deal and never appeared again. He was backed up quite ably, however, by two articulate young people - Reihana and Mahmud. Two other men and a woman were there for silent support. It was these younger members who became the key players in the coming months.

Reihana was born in New Zealand, of Fijian, Indian and Dutch parentage, and she is a fully qualified Shariah lawyer. Mahmud is a young Malaysian and serves as Secretary of the Muslim Federation. Many others have come and gone, over the past four years, but the dialogue has continued.

The caution of our first meeting dissipated quickly. Kiwi informality and open discussion broke down the barriers. By the third meeting, we found ourselves saying that we were natural allies in a secular society, saw the same problems, and sought many of the same solutions for New Zealand. We never got around to discussing Rushdie.

For four years now, we have been meeting every couple of months - sometimes a Christian venue, sometimes a Muslim. We eat together, compare notes on our experiences, and seek to learn about each other. One evening, two young Muslim women shared with us their difficulties as students at a training school for primary teachers. A series of discussions revolved around the role of Jesus in the two traditions. We tried to help them make sense of our denominational differences. The topics seem endless.

The only real hesitancy on the part of the Muslims has been a tendency to gloss over the differences within their own family. The greatest bewilderment with us appears to be that we can be so radically different within even our own denominations. Most of our Christians have been Anglicans, but representing virtually every tendency.

Good friendships have resulted. Church and school groups have visited the Islamic Centre and Muslims have visited the churches. During the Gulf War, we jointly approached the Jewish leadership. Our Archbishop, the Mullah and the Rabbi, assisted by musicians from all three communities, led a lunchtime service of intercession in the centre of our nation's capital. We prayed to the God we share, while a busy secular city ignored us. But we stood together.

A Dialogue Towards Truth in Korea

I would like to introduce an example of inter-religious dialogue which arose during the early period of Christian mission in Korea. There is in Korea a reformed Buddhism (or new religious movement) called Won-Buddhism. One day in the early 1920s So-Tae-San, the founder of this movement, met a Presbyterian missionary and they talked together about religion and truth.

This Presbyterian asked So-Tae-San: *How can I meet God and receive his instruction?* So-Tae-San replied: *If you become a good disciple of Jesus, and are able to inter-communicate with Him on the mental plane, you will achieve your goal. The Presbyterian asked again: The Bible says that Jesus will come and go like a thief in the night and that many signs will appear. Is Jesus really coming?* So So-Tae-San said: *The great saints and teachers don't tell lies. If you study and your mind is open to receive, you will see Jesus coming.*

The Presbyterian was very impressed with So-Tae-San's teaching and asked him to be his teacher. *I have long looked for a spiritual guide to teach me personally. I would like to become your disciple. But I do have a guilty conscience, because it seems like betraying Christianity to become your disciple. So So-Tae-San said to him: In Christianity, if there are true disciples of Jesus who can really become as one with him in mind, they will understand what I am doing. And if I have true disciples who become one with me in mind, they can realise what Jesus did. While people think that this teaching and that teaching are different from each other, they want to keep the distance between them. They fear betrayal and each religion regards the other with hostility. But the really enlightened person will think that all these religions, although they have different names according to time and space, are one. So it is up to you whether you become a disciple of mine, or not.*

In the end, the Presbyterian made up his mind to become a disciple. When So-Tae-San received him, he said: *Even after becoming my disciple, you have to strengthen and deepen your own mind to believe in God. That is the way to be a true disciple of mine.*

Was So-Tae-San a cunning sage out to deceive a Christian?
Or a great teacher leading us into the truth?

It is left to us to decide whether he was out to deceive or lead to the truth. But first, we, who have an ego-centric mind out to possess Jesus and God as "mine", need to determine the struggle within ourselves.

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Inter-Faith Encounter in Zambia

Zambia is a "Christian nation" as declared by President Chiluba in November 1991. It has a population of just over eight million people of whom three quarters are Christians. We accept everybody as God's creation whatever their colour or creed, thus underlining our slogan of "One Zambia, One Nation". We believe that to be human is the gift of God'

As a Christian nation of many different denominations (Roman Catholics are the largest, followed by the United Church, Independents and Evangelicals and the Anglicans), we also recognise other faiths and allow them to practise without interference. These other faiths include tribal religions, Hindus, Baha'i, Muslims with their Quran which they believe is the Revealed word of God. The Asian origin faiths are in a tiny minority and we have never had any problems with them. Therefore there has seemed to be no need of dialogue as such. There has never been a serious meeting between Christians and people of other faiths except to come together for National Prayers occasionally.

The Hindus have been in the country for many years but with little significance. They do not mix easily with others. We used to have Jewish Synagogues in the country before Independence, but these have now shut down and their buildings are being used by Pentecostal groups for worship.

Of late we have seen Muslims forcefully putting up attractive structures such as schools, clinics and Mosques. This started some five years ago and was prompted by severe weaknesses and a crisis in the economy of the country. Our then Government leaders turned to the Middle East and elsewhere for help. It was in its own way like Paul's call to come over to Macedonia! As a result, Muslims may be found today even standing by the roadside in Lusaka Makeni with sweets and biscuits to attract children to come to their nursery schools. Of course, they have beautiful restaurants in their establishments and they offer good scholarships.

The Baha'i faith hardly existed before Independence and had not been much heard of. But now the Baha'is have put up an International Girls Secondary School, where most of the "big fish" of Zambian society bring their children for better education. However the school does allow teachers who belong to other faiths and there is currently one Anglican woman member teaching there.

The Christian Council of Zambia, which embraces over fourteen denominations has seen the danger of the Islamic missionary thrust and is organising seminars and workshops for Church leaders to talk about the challenge and acquaint themselves with the Islamic Religion. We do not agree with those who say that there should be no dialogue. We are for dialogue, though we are equally clear about the need for Christians to be loyal to Jesus Christ. Across the whole world there is now growing dialogue between people of living faiths and ideologies. As the world is changing every day, it would be foolish to overlook the contemporary interaction between living faiths and ideologies, wherever we may live.

Rt Revd Clement W. Hlanya-Shaba, Bishop of Central Zambia in the Province of Central Africa

Which Side Are YOU On?

My mother was a gentile, and my father was baptised with myself and my brothers when I was seven years old; so I never thought of myself as Jewish. I knew that I was named after my grandmother and that she had died in the gas chambers, but I did not understand. My father's few surviving relatives were "behind the Iron Curtain", and when they were able to visit us we had no language in common. So when I asked Jesus to sort out my life at the age of 14, I was not consciously aware of the destruction of my father's family and community. Then my parents died, and my father's sister came. She asked me the most painful question of my life:

How can you be a Christian when the Christians killed your grandmother?"

At the time I simply denied that they were Christians. It was 25 years before I was able to look at the evidence and to admit the hard truth that Christianity provided much of the impetus towards the Holocaust.

I cannot deceive myself into believing that those concerned were "only nominal" - Anti-Jewish propaganda came from the heart of even the believing church. Nor can I deceive myself into believing that Christians were uninvolved in the destruction itself. It is true that some spoke and worked against the Nazis and for the Jews, and that many gave their lives in the war that brought it to an end; but it is also true that many stood back and let it happen, and even that there were real Christian believers involved in putting people into the gas chambers. Another way I have sought to cope with this is by denying that I am Jewish. My mother was a Gentile, so I am not Jewish according to Halakhic law. But my name tells me that life is not so simple - others can argue about my status, but I cannot avoid my history. Ida Glaser died in Auschwitz, whether people label me as "Jewish" or not.

Then there is the way out that I unconsciously took as a teenager - that it is not possible to be Jewish and Christian at the same time. Down the centuries, Jews have insisted that following Jesus is an act of treachery that stops a person from being Jewish. The implication is that, when I decided to follow Jesus, I turned my back on the Jewish people and joined the other side.

As a way out, this is even more painful than denial, because it is a way of not belonging anywhere. It means that, insofar as I am a Christian, I no longer have the right to really belong to my family. On the other hand, it means that, insofar as I am Jewish, I cannot really belong to the church. This is unbearable.

It is also false, nothing can stop me from being a member of my family - I was born into it, and no kind of separation can remove the bonds of birth. On the other hand, Jews have every right to be part of the Church. It was Gentiles who first recognised Jesus as the "King of the Jews" (Matthew 2:2) and there is no suggestion in the New Testament that Jews become gentiles when they believe in the Jewish Messiah!

Another possible escape would be to identify myself as Jewish and Christian but to dissociate myself from the European Gentile churches - to see myself as a Messianic Jew over against the people who were responsible for the Destruction. This escape I also reject - to be associated with Jesus Christ is to be associated with his people, for better or for worse. He is the place where Jews and Gentiles meet and are one people, whether they like it or not.

There is, then, no escape. By birth, I am on the "side" of the Jewish people who suffered. By choice, I am also on the "side" of the Christian people who caused the suffering. That is the challenge I have had levelled at my Christian faith - have I joined the wrong side?

Again - which side are you on?

"Jews and Christians do terrible things to us... The Jews are really monkeys... Maybe Hitler was right in trying to destroy the Jews..." All these I have heard from Muslims whom I count as friends. The Gulf War found me sitting with some and watching the destruction of their home towns on the television, but also waiting for news of relations in Israel. It is not always comfortable to be a Jewish Christian seeking to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with Muslim people.

Which side is Jesus on?

"Are you for us or for our enemies?" Joshua asked the man with the drawn sword on the edge of the Promised Land. "Neither", he replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." (Joshua 5:13-14).

For the disciple of Jesus, the key "question is not, "What side am I on?" but "What side is Jesus on?" The temptation is to reply, "On the side of the innocent, the suffering and the chosen." The Joshua passage reminds us that this may be the wrong answer. The Jews may be chosen. But that does not mean that God is on their side and against others; neither does it mean they are always innocent, especially in the Middle East today.

More than that, the Bible often surprises us by what side God is on. Going back to the first murder in Genesis 4, we find not the story of the innocent victim, but that of the guilty fratricide. Of course, the story vindicates Abel, but it focusses on God's concern with Cain - advising, warning, listening and protecting. Our God hears not only the cry of the innocent blood but also the lament of the convicted murderer.

Jesus's story of the Prodigal Son underlines the point - the accepted son is the guilty one. It is he for whom the father has wept and waited, and it is the elder who thinks himself innocent that is left with the choice of response at the end of the story. God, it seems, is on the side of the sinners - not because they are sinners, but because He loves them and they need Him.

This is most clearly seen in Jesus himself. On the cross, he is the innocent victim. At the same time, he is on the side of those who have put him there - in fact he is there for their sakes. He carries not only the pain of the victim, but also the guilt of the perpetrator. He stands on both sides, by choice. And so must I.

Ida Glaser lives in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in the North-east of England. She is the Other Faiths Secretary for BCMS-CROSSLINKS and also teaches Islam at the Northumbria Bible College.

A Story from Karnataka

The Revd D.G.S. Rodricks is a Presbyterian in the CSI Diocese of Karnataka Central. He served as Area Chairman of KGF from 1987 to 1991 and Convenor of the Nurture and Witness (Committee from 1991 to 1993.

In all the Dioceses of the Church of South India, pastoral ministry, evangelism, medical work, educational work and developmental works are the primary concerns.

In evangelism, the Diocese has 14 mission fields, 7 full-time and 1 part-time missionaries. The number of missionaries is quite small, compared to other missionary organisations which have 200 to 600.

One of our missionaries, Mrs Lilly Selvanayagam, was responsible for leading a young Hindu woman to the Lord. The young lady's name is Gayathri. Gayathri had some education -at school, but was given in marriage at the proper age to a man. Soon Gayathri found that this man was not a sincere person, but he had married her only for the money. One day as they were walking in the field, at the request of her husband and to please him, she gave away her gold jewellery. After accepting the jewels, as they were passing near a well, her husband suddenly pushed her into the well and went away. As she was struggling for her life, a passer-by who came to drink water from the well rescued her.

Gayathri was never the same again. She went into a deep gloom of depression. At that juncture, Lilly, our missionary, met her in her house. Our missionaries visit all the houses in the village. Whether accepted or rejected on previous occasions, they go and stand knocking on the doors and wait. Gayathri's parents were also disillusioned people because of what had happened in her life. They warmly received Lilly, our missionary.

Soon the Gospel, the good news of our Lord, reached their hearts. Gayathri listened attentively to the Gospel and she became a new person in Christ. After a few months I baptised her along with other converts. Her name now is Rebecca Gayathri. The great wonder is that she wants to become a missionary herself. What a great unspeakable joy you find in her life today. She lives in Chinnahalli, a village about 17 miles from the Kular Gold Fields, a town near the great city of Bangalore in South India.

One of our Diocesan priests interested in evangelism was in one of the mission fields called Hunasanahalli, 61 miles south-west of Bangalore. This mission field is in an elephant forest area. In the evening around 4 pm he was going with an interpreter of the local language to a village 4 miles away in all eagerness to share the gospel. They were walking. Both of them missed their way and entered deep into the forest. After much prayer, fear, perplexity and wandering they reached a village 10 miles away called Belapatti. Even at 11 o'clock at night the villagers warmly welcomed them, gave food and accommodation.

In the morning the villagers brought a 13 year old girl by name Deviramma who had leukaemia all over her body, which had begun to develop when she was 8 years old. The villagers, particularly the parents, asked for medical help from the big hospitals in Bangalore. The priest and the interpreter asked for some coconut oil, prayed, and applied the oil on the forehead of the girl, gave the remaining oil and wrote a short prayer for them and then went back to Hunasanahalli.

Three days later about 50 people rushed form Belapatti to Hunasanahalli to tell the good news that the Lord had healed Deviramma. All the white patches on her body had disappeared. Thus God's Word spreads with power and signs. Glory be to God. Mark 16: 20 is true today and shall be relevant to all times to come. Amen.