

Guidelines for Inter Faith Encounter in the Churches of the Porvoo Communion

Porvoo Communion Consultation on Inter Faith Relations Oslo - 30th November - 3rd December 2003

A. Beginning with God.

When as Christians we encounter people of other faiths, beliefs and spiritualities, we do so in the name and the strength of the God whom we know as Trinity. This faith points us to some key theological principles informing our encounter:

God is no less generous in salvation than in creation. The God whom we meet in creation is generous in grace and rejoices in diversity – ‘O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all!’ [Ps 104.24] This creator God is the same saving God who wishes to lead all to perfection.

Jesus Christ shows us God's face and opens the way to God. In Jesus we have seen ‘the radiance of God's glory’ [Heb 1.3]; he shows us the way to the Father and we wish to share this way with others. Our witness to this way needs to be made in such a way that it is heard as good news by all; it is not for us to proclaim limits to God's saving mercy.

The Spirit's presence is known through the Spirit's fruits. ‘The tree is known by its fruits’, and ‘the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.’ [Mt 12.33; Gal 5.22f] When we meet these qualities in our encounter with people of other faiths, by God's grace we may discern the Spirit's presence.

B. The contexts of our societies

The societies in which our churches are called to mission and ministry are increasingly marked by a plurality of religions, beliefs and spiritualities. In large measure, this is the result of histories of migration of people from other countries who have brought their faiths and cultures with them. This has happened at different rates and over different periods: in some countries there are large and established communities of faith dating back several generations, while in others religious plurality is more recent or on a smaller scale. Moreover, the situation is constantly changing, as a result of the continuing arrival of people seeking refuge and well-being in all our countries.

Beyond the visibly and culturally identifiable communities of faith, there is also now a wider plurality and fluidity of spirituality in our societies. Many seek meaning and purpose in new or alternative patterns of spirituality. There is a growth in conversions between different religions. While some opt for loose networks within which to probe ultimate questions, others turn to clearly defined answers offered through closely organised groups. At the same time, many people look for their beliefs and values to the secular and the human without reference to transcendence of any kind.

C. The challenge of discernment

In these complex and changing situations, Christian communities are faced with the challenge of discerning God's purposes in our religiously plural societies by remaining faithful disciples of Jesus Christ open to the guidance of the Spirit. Within all our churches, there will be a variety of theological starting points, methods and conclusions in responding to this challenge. As Anglicans and Lutherans, we seek to be particularly attentive to the ways in which the Bible can challenge and guide our thinking and practice in inter faith relations. In our reading together of scripture, we have found that the interaction of its texts with our contexts can at times highlight the diversity of views among us, and we recognise that Christian reflection on inter faith encounter is likely to continue to be a contested area in both our traditions for the foreseeable future.

In these circumstances, it is essential that there should be candid and positive dialogue within our communion's churches, and with fellow Christians in our ecumenical partner churches, to complement and resource our dialogue with people of other faiths, beliefs and spiritualities. In what follows, we offer as a contribution to this intra-Christian dialogue some reflections from our own experience on twelve concrete and practical issues which have a special importance for inter faith encounter in our societies. These are offered as examples; they are not intended as a comprehensive or systematic account. Moreover, given the ever-changing nature of the contexts within which our

mission and ministry is set, these pointers must be seen as work in progress, in constant need of updating and revision.

D. Twelve issues for Christians in inter faith encounter

These pointers for inter faith engagement are mostly expressed in the language of personal encounter. We have found that meeting with people of other faiths can be a profoundly transforming experience for ourselves, leading to a deepening, renewing and enlarging of faith. As Christians, though, we are never involved in inter faith situations only as individuals, but always also as members of our faith community. This representative role has a particularly high profile for ordained ministers; yet inter faith encounter is also an area of Christian discipleship where lay people have a vital role to play, and they too speak and act on behalf of the whole Church.

Building long-term trust

Our faith speaks of the centrality of permanent commitment to one another as the way to build stable and trustful relationships. In inter faith encounter, there can be no substitute for the patient, painstaking and time-consuming process of getting to know our neighbours of other faiths, earning their respect, and becoming their friends. We have found that it is within relationships of this kind, built up over many years, that dialogue acquires authenticity, the quest for truth can be honestly pursued, and difficult issues can be addressed.

Speaking truthfully about the other

Speaking truthfully requires us to avoid simplistic or homogenising language. Rather, we need to recognise the complexity and diversity of all faith communities, our own included. When we speak of the beliefs and practices of others, we must first seek good information and rely on authoritative sources to build up our knowledge, and we must talk about our neighbours in language that will enable them to recognise themselves in our descriptions. This will involve us in an imaginative and sympathetic effort to think ourselves into their situation. It is unfair to compare the ideals in our own religion with the practice of another, or vice versa. Christians and members of other communities need to acknowledge that we all face challenges in living by faith in our societies. Even in situations where we strongly disagree with others, we must make an effort to understand their beliefs and practices, to respect the faith which informs them, and to love them as our neighbours. If we feel there are times when we must be critical of others' positions, we cannot avoid the challenge of self-criticism.

Sharing our faith

We are called to share our faith with others in ways that are confident but sensitive. As we do so, we are ready to listen and to learn as well as to speak. We recognise that the intentions of those engaged in dialogue may differ, and it is easy to suspect one another of hidden agendas. We cannot force our beliefs on others, but we should always be ready to witness to our faith by deeds as well as by words. We must never exploit the situation of vulnerable individuals and groups, nor make our service of others conditional on their accepting Christian faith. Within our churches, we recognise that Christians differ among themselves about the relations between inter faith dialogue and evangelism. We think it is important that these differences should be discussed openly and respectfully in the light of our theology and experience.

Coming together before God

We acknowledge that there may be times when Christians would like to come together with people of other faiths in an attitude of prayer and worship before God. This may happen, for example, in the pastoral context of a marriage or funeral, as part of the ongoing life of a group or organisation, or at times of crisis, remembrance or thanksgiving, locally or nationally. As Christians, some of us will welcome occasions like this, while others will find them very difficult; a range of attitudes will also be found among people of other faiths. In whatever way inter faith gatherings for prayer or worship are organised, we think that it is important to be clear about the purposes of the event, to consider carefully what is an appropriate venue, and to ensure that all present can take part in what is planned with integrity and without confusion. Sharing silence can provide a valuable way of expressing our presence together before God, and we are also learning from the experience of being present as honoured guests at one another's times of prayer and worship.

Responding to changing societies

While we rejoice in the new vitality that religious and cultural diversity has brought to many parts of our societies, we are also aware of the confusion and pain that can be felt by long-established communities who find their neighbourhoods transformed. We emphasise the importance of maintaining a vigorous and engaged Christian presence at local level in multi-faith areas. We recognise also the need to be aware of the ethnic and religious discrimination in our societies which affect other faith groups.

Educating and nurturing in faith

In situations where our Churches are involved in education, we can ensure that children and young people are adequately equipped for life as citizens of religiously plural societies. As part of this, we may need to insist that Christianity is taught with an awareness of its international reach and its cultural diversity within the local situation.

Within the church community, teaching needs to be shaped in such a way as to help Christians explore the inter faith implications of their faith. Experiences of educational opportunities can help to give us a proper confidence in our own faith and a generous openness to others.

Supporting family life

We need to be sensitive to the hopes and needs of those who are thinking of embarking on marriages across the boundaries of faith. Clergy and others with a ministry of pastoral care should be equipped to provide appropriate advice and support for such couples and for their families. They also need to have access to suitable resources for the nurture and education of children of inter faith couples, and to develop patterns of support for the families of those who have converted to or from other faiths. We sense that there is a growing need to share good practice in the pastoral care of those who experience bereavement in inter faith relations.

Working for the common good

We seek co-operation with people in other faith groups on practical projects where this is appropriate and possible. We believe that our Churches have a particular role to play in encouraging our national governments and local authorities to explore and to understand the complexities of faith community organisations. We recognise that people of all faiths have a concern for the whole of society, while at the same time we all need to be honest about the real differences we can experience when we try to interpret in practical terms values which may sound the same when expressed as generalities. We believe that the Churches are called to work with people of other faiths in seeking the welfare of asylum seekers and refugees.

Involving women and men

We recognise that in many inter faith situations there is a need to strengthen the presence and active involvement of women (though in some contexts it may be men who are under-represented). Together with people in other faith communities, we should strive to ensure that participation in inter-religious events has a fair gender balance, and to set a positive lead by insisting on this in the case of Christian representation. At the same time, we need to recognise the strength of the cultural and religious factors which may inhibit the participation of women alongside men in inter faith activities. In inter faith dialogue, we should be ready to raise issues of women's rights as human rights.

Engaging with international issues

We know that it is impossible to separate inter faith relations in our own countries from the effect of situations in other countries. International issues may have a very serious impact on minority faith groups, and at times of crisis in particular we should be ready to show solidarity with communities who may be feeling under threat. The situation of vulnerable minorities in other countries will often form a significant theme of dialogue, and our Churches will feel particular bonds of prayer and affection with Christian communities experiencing persecution. We need to make it clear, though, that it is unfair to hold faith communities in our countries to account for the actions of their co-religionists in other parts of the world.

Safeguarding the freedom to believe

The Christian commitment to love our neighbours and to seek justice for all leads us to affirm the importance of religious freedom in every society. Within our own countries, this is safeguarded by the European Convention on Human Rights: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.' (1950). We have a particular concern for the rights of minority communities in our own societies. We recognise the importance of the principle of equal legal protection for all our citizens; it is important that religious authority should not be abused to control or repress vulnerable individuals.

Changing religious commitment

Where the Spirit is at work, we rejoice that conversions of people to the way of Christ may happen. They must always be the free result of God's interaction with others, not of our own planning or persuasion. We recognise that inter faith encounter is powerful and unpredictable in the transforming effect it can have on people's lives. It may lead to people changing their religious commitment away from as well as towards Christianity. People of different faiths may also feel that inter faith encounter brings them closer to God within the framework of their own religious commitment. As Christians we need to be aware of the difficulties that can be faced by new believers, and our Churches need to be prepared to change themselves in order to welcome new members. Some converts can find the whole concept of inter faith dialogue difficult, especially if it involves them in encounter with their previous religion. Other converts may have a valuable personal contribution to make to inter faith understanding, and we think that their place in dialogue should be affirmed.