

Staff and Office News

NIFCON underwent a structure change earlier in the year and October saw the first meeting of the new Management Group to oversee funding and the work of the staff. The group is chaired by The Rt Reverend Dr Michael Jackson, Bishop of Clogher (Church of Ireland). He is a friend and former colleague of Canon Dr Kenneth Kearon, who takes up his post as the new Secretary General of the Anglican Communion in January. So NIFCON now has friends in high places! We also welcome the support of The Revd Dr Kajsa Ahlstrand (Church of Sweden), The Revd Dr Colin Chapman (recently retired from the Near East School of Theology, Beirut) The Revd Dr Guli Francis-Dehqani (who brings valuable insights of the church in Iran), The Ven Dr Michael Ipgrave (now Archdeacon of Southwark, England), The Revd Canon Dr David Marshall, The Revd Dr David Thomas and The Revd Canon Dr Andrew Wingate. Each meeting of the Management Group is being planned to ensure that members will hear the views and concerns of Anglicans from different parts of the world.

With the well earned retirement of Bishop Kenneth Fernando, NIFCON is delighted to welcome The Rt Reverend Louis Tsui (Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui) as one of our three Presidents.

Funds are a serious cause for concern and we are looking to recruit some "Friends" who we hope can help on this front (amongst other duties and rewards) – more on this early next year.

The latest round of the Al Azhar dialogue went well in September and plans are in hand for the 2005 meeting. Clare is also working on an exchange programme for students of Al Azhar and Anglican Theological Colleges.

At the end of September Clare was invited to be one of the key speakers at 'Charged to do What is Right and Just', The Interfaith Education Initiative Conference hosted by the Washington National Cathedral and The College of Preachers Washington DC.

We continue to receive visitors and unsolicited news some of which makes up the reports which follow. It has been gratifying that some of you have sent us news without being chased and sorry if the response has been slow. Meanwhile, we continue to push for contacts in those parts of the communion which remain stubbornly silent for a variety of reasons. On the 'Concerns' front we are in touch with a number of advocacy organisations, (Barnabas Fund and Christian Solidarity Worldwide to mention two) CSW has also provided material for this newsletter.

The website is undergoing revision, so additions are not as prompt as they were whilst Susanne learns to do updates herself and works on a redesign too. We are hugely indebted to the Anglican Internet Services and Dr Dennis Johnson together with staff in the Anglican Communion office for getting us this far. News will be posted as soon as is possible and information gleaned from responses to the questionnaire (accompanying this letter for some of you) will also be used to compile the NIFCON pages for the edition of the Anglican Episcopal World due in Lent 2005. (But I need them asap please!)

Along with other Networks of the Anglican Communion we have been asked to gather responses to the Windsor Report. There is a very tight time frame for this so Bishop Michael and Clare have written to Official Contacts, contacts from Bangalore and the Management Group and will put together a Network reply on this basis. If you care to visit <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/index.cfm> you will see how to make personal "grassroots" responses.

Finally from the office (or more personally Clare and Susanne) may you enjoy a holy Advent and Christmas and every blessing in 2005.

Now for the real news.....

Aotearoa, New Zealand & Polynesia

NIFCON has received the latest newsletter from Interfaith Search Fiji. The Government and the Assembly of Christian Church (ACCF) there have a stated goal to unite and reconcile following the coup d'etat of 2000. However, there is some concern that this is rather superficial and Interfaith Search decided to withdraw from a planned week of Reconciliation and Forgiveness in October because the understanding of forgiveness seemed very shallow and there were no real apologies forthcoming, or moves to recompense those who had lost jobs or property. Although there have been some trials of those involved in the events of May 2000 there is as yet no truth telling mechanisms to help with healing wounds.

Interfaith Search Fiji is now 17 years old. A history of the movement was presented at a Conference on History and the Island Churches of the Pacific in the 20th Century during October. In November the World Council of Churches held "School for Mission: Voicing the Gospel in the Pacific" in Suva, Fiji.

Copies of the paper 'Christian Mission in Multi-faith Fiji' presented at the event is available from the NIFCON office on request.

The recent Management Group meeting also had a visit from Dr Douglas Pratt. He is working on an historical and demographic overview of the religious makeup of New Zealand. We hope to add this to our 'perspectives' section on the website early next year.

Bangladesh

Reports from Hotline Human Rights Bangladesh have been received. The round up of incidents makes depressing reading. In particular the Ahmadiyya community has been subject to personal attacks and a ban on 20 of its publications, Adivasi women have been harassed and in general Hindu and Christian minorities have been subject to rapes and murder. Sometimes attacks arise out of land grabbing or other 'secular' disputes but minorities rarely find redress through the legal system. However, in November a Division Bench of the High Court issued a *rule nisi* asking the government to investigate attacks on religious minorities and to submit a report on the matter by mid January.

Despite all this (and the devastating floods over the last three months) the more personal letter from our contact (who has also suffered family bereavements this year) thanks God for all the graces, assistance, strength and courage to bear everything which outweigh the suffering and struggle. We pray that they may continue to be able to travel and meet with others working for human rights in 2005.

Canada

Mike Wellwood from the Diocese of New Westminster visited the Anglican Communion Office with the Compass Rose Society. He left a report on The Vancouver InterSpiritual Centre. The vision is for a shared house of worship which will also be a place of learning and dialogue, community engagement and a model for InterSpiritual cooperation. The centre hopes to offer a welcome to those exploring sharing and expressing spirituality and a programme of activities to support individuals and groups taking action to make a positive difference in their own lives, each other's lives, the local community and the world. The site for this project is within a development whose original plans had no worship facility at all. The report speaks with excitement of the cooperation the project is receiving from the City Council and the close working of faith groups whilst honouring their differences – a counter balance to gloomy newspaper portrayal of friction between the faiths, and a model of good practice to the wider community.

We hope to hear more as the project moves forward.

Jerusalem and the Middle East

Before the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 a visiting preacher warned staff at Partnership House (London) about the likely effect of such an invasion on Christians in Iraq. A report on the ekklesia website (www.ekklesia.co.uk) drawn to our attention suggests his words were prophetic. Christians and ethnic minorities face the most strategic imminent danger from insurgents. Minority groups are often perceived as having sympathies with the West. Chaldo-Assyrians, Mandeans, Roma and Yazidi have existed in the region since before the birth of Islam. Many from these groups are now fleeing the country.

On a more positive note two Irish bishops, one Anglican and one Roman Catholic spent a week in Cairo, Egypt, meeting religious and civic leaders, drawing on comparisons between the initiatives for dialogue and reconciliation in Ireland and the need for reconciliation and dialogue in the Middle East. Meeting the Secretary-General of the Arab League, Mr Amro Moussa, Archbishop John Neill and Bishop John Mcareavey were able to assure him that the war in Iraq did not have the support or sanction of the mainstream Christian Churches. They also expressed disapproval of the notion that there is a "clash of civilisations" either between the Middle East and the Western world or between Christians and Muslims. The Irish churchmen said they were encouraged by the on going dialogue with Al-Azhar. Bishop Mouneer and Sheikh Fawzy accepted an invitation from the two church leaders to make a return visit to Ireland.

The Interfaith Encounter Association organised, in cooperation with the Nablus Youth Federation, an Israeli-Palestinian interfaith retreat for young adults. The retreat was very successful. For more details go to www.interfaith-encounter.org

Pakistan

NIFCON received a report from Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) following a visit to Pakistan during October and November 2004. This is a brief summary:-

Christian, other religious minorities and women continue to suffer persecution in many forms – reformist rhetoric not matched in reality. Human Rights activists are often suspected of being agents of the West, Jews and India. Despite this The Rt Rev Samuel Azariah, Bishop of Raiwind (Church of Pakistan) is “slightly encouraged by some developments affecting oppressed minorities”. Restoration of the Joint Electorate System is a major achievement for the them. “President Musharraf has been the most minority-friendly leader we have ever had” says Bishop Azariah. However, when the number of seats in the National Assembly was increased from 272 to 342 and Senate seats from 87 to 100 the number of minority reserved seats was not increased proportionately. There are still only 10 seats in the National Assembly and none in the Senate.

The blasphemy law is still a huge problem. Since the introduction of the law in 1985 the number of deaths, false convictions, wrongful imprisonments, case of torture and religious conflict have risen significantly. Legislation criminalising honour killings was passed on October 26 but changes to the blasphemy law in the form of amendments to the Pakistan Penal Code have not yet been adopted. The law is often used to settle old scores or pursue political ends. The 1979 Hudood Ordinances (relating to the requirement for evidence in court in, for example, rape cases) are also a cause for concern. While the Government has proposed minor procedural reforms it has not implemented the recommendations of the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) which called for a repeal of the Ordinances. The Pakistani National Assembly has passed a bill tightening the law on honour killings.

On June 2 2003 the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) Provincial Assembly unanimously adopted the Shari’ah Bill *sic*, introducing Shari’ah law as the governing code. The Government there is led by The Muttahia Majilis-e-Amal (MMA), a grouping of extremist Islamic political parties. There have been allegations that the elections were rigged in the parties favour. This Government has also drafted the Hisba Act, which has been described as “Mullah martial law” and it is thought that it will create a climate of fear. Even the Council on Islamic Ideology is believed to have significant reservations about the draft Act but it has not been publicly opposed. The fear is that the legislation will lead to an increase of the misuse of Islamic laws against minorities.

There is a feeling that attempts to ‘reform’ the Madrassas by encouraging them to register and become part of the mainstream education system is strengthening rather than diminishing their influence and does nothing to counter the radical teaching promulgated in many of them.

The clear view of every religious minority group and human rights organisation in Pakistan is that international pressure for reform is required now more than ever and it is to be hoped that President Musharraf will press for further significant reforms to legislation.

The CSW report also mentioned the meeting of Religious Leaders from Pakistan which took place in Oslo, Norway in June 2004. A delegation of prominent Muslim Scholars and leaders of the Federation of Organisations of religious Institutions were given a special invitation by the Government of Norway. At the same time Bishops from the Church of Pakistan were also visiting at the invitation of the Norwegian Church Aid. Both groups had important discussions with the Norwegian Church Aid on Development and Emergency work as well as on Peace Building Activities. Out of various deliberations came an agenda for peace, cooperation and action to be implemented at various levels. The full text of the agenda appears on the NIFCON website.

As a follow up to this meeting a gathering of Muslims and Christians (almost 300) met in Islamabad on 16 September 2004 under the chairmanship of General Pervez Musharraf. The meeting launched the World Council of Religions, established to promote Peace, justice and Harmony across religious, social and political areas of communities at local, national and global levels. Again, the text of the Islamabad Declaration can be found at www.anglicannifcon.org

Sri Lanka

Again CSW sent a report on a recent visit. As other sources have told us the development of evangelical Christian activity in Sri Lanka has meant a growth in inter religious tension. Anti- Christian violence has increased over the last 4 years. There are still attempts to introduce an Anti-Conversion Bill. The High Court declared two clauses of the proposed bill unconstitutional but the party proposing it have announced they will make amendments. There is also a proposal to make Buddhism the state religion rather than, as is it currently, the “foremost” religion. Plans to make it illegal for Buddhists to convert have to be set against the anger and sense of grievance felt on the part of many Buddhists and Hindus towards the activities of evangelical Christians and “unethical” conversion tactics.

The three major Christian groups, the Catholic Bishops Conference, the NCC and the NCEASL, admit that there may be some truth in the allegations made by the Buddhists and Hindus about “unethical” conversions, but they argue that many of the allegations are wildly exaggerated, unsubstantiated and based on rumour. They argue that legislation is not the way to solve the problem and are working on a proposal for alternative measures. Appeals to those making the accusations to meet with NCEASL representatives to conduct an enquiry into alleged cases together have not had a response to date.

The NCC has developed a Code of Ethics for Mission and NCEASL has developed a document entitled “Good Practices in Ministry”.

As in other parts of the communion there are issues around the links between faith and culture. Where Christianity is presented in a Western format it is deemed to threaten the indigenous cultures. Some feel that international advocacy on behalf of Sri Lankan Christians can have an adverse effect in the long term since it may further the image of them as “tools of the West” Others feel that advocacy has helped with issues of human rights but that private conversations with Government leaders are preferable to public statements.

Sudan

This news is taken from a report by The Rev Patrick Augustine who serves as canon and commissary of the Archbishop of the Sudan to the church in the US.

Geographically, Sudan is Africa’s largest country. Its population of 30 million includes a primarily Muslim Arab northern region and an animist Christian African community in the south. Christians represent 16.7% of the total population. The Sudanese government is dominated by the National Islamic Front.

The country has endured civil war for four decades, with rebels in southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains who oppose imposition of shari’ah law fighting against the government and their military agencies. Not all Muslim concur with the imposition of shari’ah either.

The western area of Darfur had suffered persistent drought over the last 20 years which has forced the Arab nomads to move to the more arable lands farmed by black Africans. In the late 1980’s the competition for land turned violent. The conflict is often portrayed in terms of a struggle between Arabs and Africans or Muslims and Christians, but the roots are in land shortage caused by drought.

In May 2004 the Sudan government and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army signed a peace agreement for the cessation of hostilities. In November 2004 a memorandum of understanding between the Sudanese government and southern rebels pledges to end two decades of war by December 31 2004. The MOU demands that the government, rebel forces and other armed groups immediately cease all violence and attacks.

In the midst of the conflict, the Episcopal Church of the Sudan, based in the Christian south, has been growing. Some have seen it as the fastest growing province in the Anglican communion. Church leaders are now preparing themselves for peace time. The task ahead is demanding. There are undemocratic processes in the church to tackle, especially in the ethnic-based congregations, before the church can be an agent of democratisation. The church must be seen to be setting a good example and pace. Amongst Islamic leaders there is not much spirit of tolerance and reconciliation. Reconciliation is difficult but not impossible to achieve. The call to Christians is, even in the face of hatred, to mend relationships so as to minimise hatred, bitterness, and revenge.

Other sources have suggested that politically there are two options for Sudan; that it remain one nation – in which case the Muslim majority will need to live in a spirit of unity in diversity with the Christians by rejecting issues that divide them, such as the imposition of shari’ah and the attempts by the governments in Khartoum to assimilate southerners religiously, culturally and linguistically; that the south becomes a separate entity – in which case the Christians would have to ensure that the Muslim minority do not suffer in the same way that they have. Further more non-Muslims would have to be prevented from exacting revenge. In conclusion, the problems Sudan will face, whether the country is divided or not, will be an issue for the minority as well as the majority, regardless of their religious affiliation.

One indication of the optimism to be found in the church is the anxiety to develop better theological training for the clergy. Contact clare.amos@anglicancommunion.org for more information.

The Episcopal Church of the United States

The last report from CSW concerns Cuba (Province IX of ECUSA) and is based on a visit in the spring this year. Their report speaks of a deterioration in human rights and a reversion to pre 1990 orthodox communist legislation which has an adverse effect on religious freedom.

In October Sonia Omulepu sent a round up of a wide range of news items (for which we thank you). The report runs to 21 pages of brief introductions each with hotlinks to full stories on the internet. If anyone would like to receive Sonia’s emailed report please contact Susanne at the NIFCON office susanne.mitchell@anglicancommunion.org

African Anglican Bishops' Conference

An article in African Anglican Daily at the time of the conference gave some interesting figures on the church and Islam and the recent push to increase Islamic influence in Africa. The article concludes, 'Given the facts, the Church should take proactive steps in Moslem evangelism. These will include: a) The teaching of Islam in all the Seminaries should be more wide ranging. (b) Some Churches in Europe have sought to reach people from Moslem countries who are living in Europe. Similar strategies should be adopted in the various Dioceses. (c) The Church should generally resist the temptation to react in kind to the antagonistic attitudes of Moslems.'

This concludes the summary of news from around the communion but I should like to get another newsletter out in March 2005 so please submit your contributions (complete your questionnaires) as soon as is convenient.

A number of Network members have either just published or about to publish books. Ruwan Palapathwala's 'Divine Footprints' was promoted in the Trinity edition of Anglican Episcopal World. We congratulate Clare Amos on her Genesis commentary and wish Lucinda Mosher and Charles B. Jones well with their forthcoming titles which we shall list on the website and or next news letter. Do ask Susanne if you would like more details of any of these or have your own title to promote.

Last but certainly not least the most frequently stated request for help in inter faith work submitted on our questionnaire is for prayer. Here are a few suggested prayer topics in light of the above;

For those working on inter faith projects in isolation against opposition from fellow Christians.

For those whose offering of the gospel is undermined by insensitive or dubious missionary tactics.

For greater sensitivity and understanding of cultures in evangelism.

For the church in Pakistan and a resolution to internal difficulties.

For a more responsible portrayal of conflicts in the media.

Thanksgiving for all that makes for peace and builds not just our common life but our tolerance of diversity.

AMEN