

## Staff and Office News

As intended this section is getting shorter as news from around the Communion increases. The big news is that plans are in place for the next NIFCON Consultation, this time in Kaduna, Nigeria, in February 2007, around the theme of faith and citizenship.

A six-monthly news letter often means that contributions to it have to wait some time for the next edition. However, news that someone somewhere else is doing anything at all is often encouraging, even if the news is no longer 'hot'. Sending 200 emails en bloc results in some being blocked as spam but sending them individually is very slow. If all goes as planned the next newsletter (December) will appear on the website and you will be asked to refer to it there. (Yes, the major overhaul of the website is still in progress.) Individual emails and the printed version of the news letter will still be sent on request – we want to reach and include as many folk as possible. We also need to receive news on a more regular and unsolicited basis – then we can do more frequent news round-ups. What you are doing is important and is of interest to others so please do tell us about it.

## Around the Communion

### Aotearoa/New Zealand/Polynesia

This report combines news sent in January and June 2006. In reaction to the London bombings last July (2005), five Auckland mosques were vandalised in a period of a few hours, and two young men were subsequently apprehended and charged. Responses to the vandalism, and the attitude it represented, were widespread and prompt, with statements being issued by many church and other religious groups, including bishops and clergy of the Diocese of Auckland. On 24 July (2005), the Council of Christians and Muslims organised a public **Rally of Tolerance** in the city centre, with religious and political leaders present. This event gained extensive media coverage and much positive feedback from the wider community.

Similar shock and concern in response to an earlier event – the desecrating of Jewish graves in Wellington in 2004 – have led to a governmental initiative in the formation of the **Diversity Action Programme**, a project-based network of organisations and groups which are engaged in positive action towards the embracing and celebration of cultural and religious diversity. A significant aspect of this is the deliberate move by a secular government to consult with faith communities, including and beyond churches.

During the past two to three years, inter-faith relationships have been given a clearer infra-structure with the foundation of several new organisations, including a national **Inter-faith Forum**, with local counterparts in Auckland and Wellington. The strong involvement of the Unification Church ('Moonies') as 'movers and shakers' in this development poses a challenge for some of the mainline Christian inter-faith personnel.

The Muslim community in New Zealand – now numbering over 40,000 – though ethnically diverse and divided, is steadily gaining a higher positive public profile. Contributing to this are such factors as a student-initiated Islam Awareness Week; one Muslim Member of Parliament (with other candidates standing in last year's general election); and the recent celebration of 25 years of the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand (FIANZ). The Auckland-based **Council of Christians and Muslims** (which has strong Anglican support in its leadership and membership) provides an increasingly significant meeting point between the two communities in dialogue, advocacy and joint action.

In March 2006 a Dialogue on Regional Interfaith Co-operation for Peace, Development and Human Dignity was held in Cebu, the Philippines. Sponsored by the governments of Australia, Indonesia, New Zealand and the Philippines, this event followed a similar one in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in December 2004. A third will be hosted by New Zealand in 2007. The New Zealand delegation of ten, to Cebu, included an Anglican priest and bishop. *There is further comment on the Cebu meeting in the news from Papua New Guinea.*

The serious engagement of governmental bodies with faith communities is a relatively new and fast-developing trend within New Zealand, following on from recent incidents of terrorism and natural disaster, internationally, and of anti-religious abuse internally. Some recent examples are: **National Interfaith Network Aotearoa New Zealand**

Facilitated by the Human Rights Commission (under the direction of the government-appointed Race Relations Commissioner). The Network connects national and local religious communities, government agencies, religious studies academics, and inter-faith bodies, and publicises programmes and projects which celebrate diversity and contribute to inter-religious understanding and co-operation.

## **Inter-faith events at Parliament**

Parliament has hosted events marking Chinese New Year, Hannukah, Eid-ul-Fitr, Diwali etc.

## **Religious dialogue with the Media**

This was facilitated by the Human Rights Commission following the 'Danish cartoon' controversy and a satirical TV programme offensive to Catholics in particular. Some agreement was reached that freedom of the press came with responsibility for sensitivity and consultation.

## **Auckland City Council dialogue with Faith Communities.**

Christian civic leaders, including Auckland's Mayor and Deputy Mayor have initiated an on-going dialogue with religious communities representative of the rapidly increasing diversity of New Zealand's largest city.

Interfaith Councils are now well established in the larger centres, especially in Auckland, Hamilton and Wellington. An increasing number of small local initiatives is being reported from around the country.

The Auckland-based Council of Christians and Muslims, and the Council of Christians and Jews (Auckland and Wellington) continue regular activities, public meetings, etc. The annual joint CCM/CCJ gathering, in August will have the theme of 'Care of Creation'.

*Revd Bruce Keeley*

## **Australia**

Towards the end of 2005 the General Synod Standing Committee passed a resolution in relation to Dialogue with the Jewish Community confirming its desire 'to enter into inter-faith dialogue with representatives of the Australian Jewish community; and subject to the agreement of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, the dialogue process be convened by the Anglican Church nominating at least three representatives who might engage with representatives of the Jewish community on particular issues of mutual concern;'. The Revd Canon Dr Ray Cleary is charged with holding initial discussions and appointing the Anglican representatives. The group of representatives will report through the Public Affairs Commission, will be 'resourced appropriately' and will be reviewed in 2009.

*We look forward to hearing more from Dr Cleary as this initiative develops.*

## **Canada**

### **Interfaith Engagement in Canada June 2006**

#### **Terrorism & Dialogue**

Interfaith dialogue is becoming an even more pressing issue in Canada in the aftermath of the arrest of seventeen youth and adult Muslim men charged with planning a terrorist attack in Canada. A positive outcome has been the more public emergence of moderate Muslims protesting the stereotyping of Muslims and inviting others to understand their cultures and faith more clearly. There is an undercurrent of urgency for churches to respond and engage in intentional community building with Muslim neighbours, individually and corporately. The Rev. Edmund Laldin, Diocese of Western Newfoundland, will be seeking support at an upcoming Provincial Synod (Canada) to engage proactively in interfaith dialogue throughout the Ecclesiastical Province of Canada. We pray that other Anglicans will similarly take up the challenge.

#### **Music & Dialogue**

In British Columbia Anglicans share in the Multi-Faith Action Society (producers of an excellent Multi-Faith Calendar). The Society explored a new kind of interfaith exchange this past year through an evening of music. Local choirs of different faith groups gathered and performed for an interfaith audience, sharing the gifts of their faith through musical expression. Future additional concerts are planned building on the successful first event.

#### **Interfaith Resources**

The Canadian Council of Churches Interfaith Committee has just completed a resource kit of information to assist congregations to begin or extend interfaith dialogue. The kit includes contact information for denominational leaders; a bibliography; audio visual resources for adults and youth; and links to interfaith organisations across the country. The kit will be posted on the CCC website <http://www.ccc-ccc.ca/> and distributed through denominational offices. It has been sent to the Anglican Interfaith Officers and interested individuals across Canada and is posted on the Anglican Church of Canada website <http://www.anglican.ca/faith/relationships>.

## AIDS Conference

The Anglican Church of Canada is sponsoring a delegation of participants to the Ecumenical Pre-Conference to the International AIDS Conference to be held in Toronto in August 2006. The Pre-Conference will conclude with an Interfaith day. As well, an Interfaith Service will be held at St. James' Cathedral, Toronto during the main conference.

Canon Linda Nicholls, Coordinator for Dialogue, Anglican Church of Canada

Canon Nicholls has written a very useful paper on 'Multiculturalism, Sharia law and Interfaith Dialogue' from a Canadian perspective. Copies available from the NIFCON office.

Dr Stuart E Brown recently finished his time as Executive Director of the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism. In his final report he mentioned his on-going involvement in interfaith dialogue, especially between Christians and Muslims (in the Cercle de Montréal, the Quebec committee and the National Liaison Committee). He was also called as an "expert" consultant to the City of Laval in a lawsuit concerning the city council's practice of reading an invocation at the beginning of its sessions. (He also attended a panel on a Supreme Court ruling about kirpans in schools.) Dr Brown is returning to West Africa, this time Nigeria, and we look forward to hearing his news from there.

## England

As mentioned in the last newsletter The Christian Muslim Forum was launched during a reception at Lambeth Palace in January. More details of the Forum and its work can be found at [www.christianmuslimforum.org](http://www.christianmuslimforum.org). (In particular see Ian Linden's report on the conference held in Chicago in May looking at Christian Muslim relations in four different parts of the world.) The celebrations were muted by news of the death of Shaikh Dr Mohamed Aboulkhair Zaki Badawi KBE whose contribution to Christian Muslim relations in Britain and around the globe over the last nearly thirty years is immeasurable. Sir Sigmund Sternberg, co-founder of the Three Faiths Forum said of Dr Badawi 'We need him now more than ever before' and Prince Charles, in tributes at a memorial in March, urged those present to carry on his legacy.

*The Rt Revd Christopher Herbert submitted the following on Jewish Christian relations in England.*

Relations with the Jewish community have been extremely difficult over the last twelve months. This is largely due to the issue of calls for the Church of England to disinvest in 'Caterpillar' - the international company whose vehicles have been used by Israel to demolish Palestinian homes in the West Bank. While the Anglo-Jewish community by no means agreed on the actions or policies of the Israeli government, and some are quite critical, there is nevertheless a sense of being 'under threat by association', however unrealistic this is. Unfortunately, the figures on anti-Semitism continue to show a rise in Europe as a whole and, to an extent, in Britain also. The Jewish community feel threatened and look to the Christian community for a more understanding lead. While Christian concern for injustices and poverty in Palestine are crucially important, it is also necessary to reassure Jewish partners in dialogue that they have not been abandoned.

On a more positive note, the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the return of the Jews to England under Oliver Cromwell has enabled a range of opportunities for joint celebration. A further positive development is the growth of interest on university campuses in inter faith matters; in particular, text studies from a post modern perspective are becoming popular.

New ground was broken at the October General Synod by a fringe meeting at which members were addressed by the President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews and a senior orthodox Rabbi. The opportunity to listen and discuss issues raised was well-received by those who attended and was also greatly valued by the Jewish community as a sign of the desire for Anglicans to continue the dialogue.

*And on Hindu Christian relations Revd Canon Dr Andrew Wingate reports;*

The main new initiative being launched is the Hindu-Christian Listening Exercise, under the name of the Archbishop. There is a steering group of eight, four Hindus and four Christians, with Guy Wilkinson as chair. It is linked with the Hindu-Christian Forum UK, of which I am joint chair. It includes the four main Hindu national organisations, and several churches. The listening exercise is to ascertain the range of main issues facing the Hindu community in Britain, and also to widen the range of groups that we are in contact with. So we will plan future activities and objectives of the national forum. The Hindu community is rightly proud of its high level of integration in Britain, its economic successes, the high level of education of its young people (the highest on average in the country), its low level of crime, and also the way it has established its structures here, with about 150 temples now, for its 559,000 population.

## IAFPA

The inaugural meeting of the Inter-Faith Action for Peace in Africa (IFAPA) Commission ended in Kigali, Rwanda, on 22 June with Africa's religious leaders agreeing to use the instrument for a peaceful future for the continent and all its people.

“We have begun the task of working together for peace. We have already gained considerable experience in responding to the challenges of conflict and poverty through our respective interfaith networks and organizations,” the participants in the 19-22 June meeting stated in their final report. Called for by the Second IFAPA Summit in April 2005, the IFAPA Commission will provide guidance and enhance the effectiveness of the ongoing process of engaging religious leaders in peace-building initiatives in Africa. The commission includes 23 persons representing African Traditional Religion, the Baha'i faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. Inaugurating the commission on 19 June, Rwanda's President Paul Kagame commended Africa's religious leaders for choosing a faith approach that would “remove ambiguities sometimes associated with individual religious communities regarding where they stand in terms of peace.” The convenor of IFAPA, Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), noted that the testing point “for any initiative for Africa, including IFAPA, is whether we are truly and genuinely leading Africa out of an 'envelope' situation into development.” He had defined development as the process of setting free one's potential for self-affirmation and self-determination. The 70 participants attending the meeting also included representatives of the international community, advisers and observers, and an international team of journalists.

Alongside the launch of the IFAPA Commission, the participants in the Kigali meeting heard about the African Monitor, an independent body initiated by the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, Njongonkulu Ndungane, to promote an African voice in the development debate. The President of the Pan-African Parliament, Ms Gertrude Mongella, and the Vice-Chair of the African Union Commission, Mr Patrick Mazimpaka, attended the inaugural ceremony and assured IFAPA of the cooperation of these important regional governance structures and institutions.

The conference also discussed conflict and post-conflict situations in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Togo and Uganda, and proposed possible action plans by IFAPA. Other issues included the women's call for a healthy Africa under the campaign “A Mother's Cry for a Healthy Africa.”

Water as a fundamental human development goal, its religious significance, and particularly its necessity for the well being of vulnerable women and children, was also discussed.

Dr Noko said the Kigali meeting was particularly significant as the seven religions represented in IFAPA had agreed on a draft constitution and a proposed budget for the commission. “We have never, since the foundation of this continent, had the seven religions agreeing on principle,” he told journalists at a press conference at the end of the meeting.

The draft constitution will be formally adopted at a Third IFAPA Summit planned for 2008.

The IFAPA Commission participants visited the Kigali Memorial Center and offered prayers for victims of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, in which some 1 million people died. Throughout the meeting, emphasis was made on the “powerful motivation and inspiration” provided by Rwanda as the venue, in view of the dedicated peace and reconciliation initiatives by the government, religious communities and the people themselves. Anglican Archbishop Emmanuel Kolini told participants in the closing ceremony that, although the Rwandan church felt abandoned during the genocide 12 years ago, the presence of IFAPA made them feel embraced. “If we are together, Africa will be peaceful,” he said.

*Taken from Lutheran World Information - Fredrick Nzwili, contributor.*

## India

In April the state of Rajasthan passed a Freedom of Religion Bill Which, despite its title, “curtails fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution to practice, preach and propagate one's own religion” according to Bishop D K Sahu, NCCI general secretary. This anti conversion legislation, along the same lines as that passed in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Chattisgarh is seen as part of a co-ordinated strategy against religious minorities and has been opposed by Muslims and secularists as well as Christians. Rajasthan's interior minister, Gulab Chand Kataria, declared “Some religious institutions, bodies and individuals are involved in unlawful conversion by allurement or by fraudulent means or forcibly” Those opposed to the bill say this is the BJP making mischievous propaganda.

## Ireland

In January CMS Ireland hosted an historic visit by Christian and Muslim leaders from Egypt. The Episcopal (Anglican) Bishop of Egypt Dr Mouneer Hanna Anis, Shaykh Dr Ali Gomma, the Grand Mufti of Egypt and Rector of al-Azhar University, and Shaykh Fawzy el-Zefzaf, The President of the al-Azhar Committee for Interfaith Dialogue began the delegation's visit by meeting Archbishop Robin Eames and Roman Catholic Primate Archbishop Seán Brady. From Armagh the group moved to Dublin visiting the mosque in Clonskeagh. The Grand Mufti urged Muslims to “integrate fully ....and become good citizens and neighbours.” At a meeting with President Mary McAleese Bishop Mouneer presented her with the first copy of CMSI's publication ‘Hand of History’, a resource pack to assist parishes seeking to promote local contact with Muslims. The President

spoke of cherishing minority communities in any country. She acknowledged that this initiative of CMSI Was “swimming against the tide”, but encouraged them to keep up the engagement. The delegation also visited Trinity College Dublin. The visit was deemed to be a great success giving an opportunity for all involved to understand one another more accurately. As the Grand Mufti said “Behind the visit is building bridges of co-operation between Egypt and Ireland and of correcting misconceptions that come to people’s minds through the media, the press.”

## **Kenya**

It was with very great sadness we learned of the death in a plane crash of Bishop William Waqo Boru. Bishop Boru worked tremendously hard for God through the Church in Kenya. He leaves a wife (also ordained priest) and young family.

From St Paul’s United Theological College, Limuru we received a report on the Post-Graduate Programmes in Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations. The MA course came about at the request of the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa, PROCUMURA. In the report the Programme Director at St Paul’s, John Chesworth, explains the changing context of Christian ministry in Africa with Islam growing and adherence to African Traditional Religions declining. The objectives of the programme are essentially but not exclusively; The provision of necessary tools for Christian-Muslim positive engagement; Doing Christian mission in an interfaith milieu; Appreciation of the Christian-Muslim presence in Africa and its meaning for Christian living.

The first intake of students started in September 2004 and with the third intake in September the combined student body will represent, Kenya, Tanzania, Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia. There is a post-Graduate Diploma (12 months) as well as an MA (4 semesters). The report goes on to state “In October we expect the first nine MAs to be awarded and three Post-Graduate Diplomas. These people will be used by their churches and national council of churches to inform and equip people to be able to relate to Muslims.

The church in Africa does need people who are appropriately trained to help with interfaith relations and to develop expertise.”

*Further details of the course or a full copy of the report can be obtained from the NIFCON office.*

## **Pakistan**

**We received the following report form the Youth Department of the Diocese of Peshawar.**

### **Youth Initiative towards Inter-Faith Dialogues:**

It is very first time that the Youth Department of the Diocese of Peshawar - Church of Pakistan took an initiative towards Inter-faith dialogues and to form an Inter-faith Forum, initially among the Muslim and Christian Youth.

### **The Situation in our Country:**

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is a country, where today it is a great need of the time to build up Inter-faith relationships, peace and harmony among different religions living in it. The recent Cartoon issue and the USA’s policies of attacking different countries in the world, always creates problems for minorities living in Pakistan, and especially for Christians living in Pakistan. On the Cartoon issue, there was a great anger among the Muslim community all over the world against Denmark and other European countries, it caused violence against Christian in Pakistan. There were some attacks on Christians and their institutions. These incidents also happened, when USA attacked Afghanistan and Iraq.

### **The Diocesan Efforts for Religious Harmony:**

The Diocese of Peshawar is trying to establish good relations with our Muslim friends. For this purpose the Bishop of Peshawar with his special interest struggled and worked to form a Forum with the Muslim religious leaders at large level named, “Faith Friends”.

### **The Diocesan Youth Initiative:**

The Youth Department of the Diocese of Peshawar has now formed with the Muslim religious leaders, at large level a forum at Youth Level with a Muslim Youth Organisation called, “Tanzeem-e-Nojawanan”, meaning “Youth Organisation” to build up good relationship and to create Peace & harmony in our country between different religions at youth level.

The first meeting of the youth of both religions was held on 11 May 2006, at the Diocesan Centre, Peshawar. We all discussed that we should have an Inter-faith forum at youth level so that we could work together for bringing religious peace and harmony between two religions. The Muslim friends in the meeting, condemned and apologised on the act of some extremist Muslims, who attacked the Christian institutions in Pakistan after the Cartoon issue, they said it wasn’t a religious issue and it wasn’t a fault of any religious group. They said that we jointly would stop these kinds of acts in future. They said that we should plan now for the situation if USA would attack on Iran, if this happened, then we should jointly struggle to stop all kind of violence and attacks on the minorities in Pakistan and especially in our province NWFP.

The following main recommendations and ideas were developed in the first meeting.

- The participants from both sides were agreed to form a proper forum for Inter-faith activities. And would be selected some responsible persons to coordinate the Forum.
- Initially, it would be a forum for Muslims & Christians, but in future, we shall bring other minority groups in it.
- The Forum will work to bring religious peace & harmony between the religions living in Pakistan, initially focusing on NWFP.
- It will stop all kind of violence and persecution on minority groups living in our country.
- It will organise Peace-walks, Seminars, Press-conferences to bring peace and harmony among different religious groups in the country.

Second meeting on 27 May 2006, in which the Bishop of Peshawar, Rt. Rev. Mano Rumlshal honoured and addressed the meeting. In his speech, he emphasised on the need of forming a forum for Inter-Faith dialogue and creating peace & harmony among the people of two religions. He said, we all are human beings and it is not good to fight against each other just because of different religions. We can work together for bringing peace in the country and can also start some joint project for welfare and social development of our people of Pakistan. In Second Meeting, following things were discussed:

- The Forum was given a name in this meeting, which is “Youth Faith Friends”.
- The main Objective of the Forum will be to create Peace, Harmony and Brotherhood among the people of two religions.
- The people of both faiths should sit together at one platform and promote and work for the common things of both faiths (religions).
- Two Co-ordinators were selected in the meeting to co-ordinate and run the work of the “Youth Faith Friends” Forum. The Co-ordinators are Mr. Insar Gohar & Mr. Jumait Ali Shah.
- Next Programme will be a “Peace Talk”, in which people from both the communities will come and there will be an open discussion on bringing peace and harmony between two religions. Initially we are inviting 10 people from each community (Christian and Muslim) and observers from other religious communities, like Hindus, Sikhs and others.

*Insar Gohar, Youth Coordinator*

## **Papua New Guinea**

*Bishop Peter Fox and his wife Angelique have now returned to the UK but have sent regular reports among them this one*

### **Inter-Faith Peacemakers by Bishop Peter Fox.**

Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.” (Matthew 5:9). As delegates from all over Asia and the Pacific gathered for the Inter-Faith Dialogue Conference in Cebu, the Philippines, from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> March, peace was at the top of the agenda and the question all were asking was, “How can we help one another to establish harmony among our peoples?” We came from many Faiths: some of us were Christians of various churches; some were Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Baha’is; some of us came from other smaller Faiths. All of us shared one thing in common, a desire to work for peace and understanding. Ten of us came from Papua New Guinea and we too added our voice to the cry for peace. We all know that there are terrorists who claim to act on behalf of one Faith or another but that claim is false. True followers of all the great Faiths want peace not war. They want tolerance of one another not prejudice against each other. They want mutual respect and not fearfulness. The Cebu delegates, our PNG representatives among them, sent a clear message to the men of violence, the terrorists and bigots, “You are no true believers. Don’t call yourselves by our name!” I heard a wonderful quote from the Prophet Mohammed, founder of Islam. Mohammed said, “You will not enter heaven until you believe;

And you will not believe until you love one another; And you will not love one another until you make peace together.” Jesus and Mohammed, Buddha and Bahullah all spoke words of peace. When will the World learn to listen?

## PROCMURA

### Witnessing in a pluralistic landscape in Africa

Programme for Christian Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA)'s European Liaison Committee meeting at the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) Conference Centre, Nairobi. 26 Jan – 1 Feb 2006

What timing! The Danish cartoon furore broke out just after the thirty staff of PROCMURA, from countries across middle Africa – Senegal to Tanzania - , returned to their churches enthused by meeting in Kenya. Phone calls from them to Johnson Mbillah, the PROCMURA General Adviser based in Nairobi, emphasised to him the importance and relevance of the work of PROCMURA as an organisation devoted to bridge building and peacemaking without any compromise of faith. The publication of the caricature of Prophet Mohammed has been seized upon by those who choose to react violently by either attacking Christians, such as in Maiduguri, Northern Nigeria, or by Christians attacking Muslims as in Onitsha, Southern Nigeria. The Chair of PROCMURA who was present at the Nairobi meeting is the Anglican Archbishop Josiah Idowu Fearon from Kaduna in Nigeria's Middle Belt, a place where all his skills and experience as a Christian leader are needed – peaceful and loving rather than aggressive and polemical.

By having the annual meeting of European partners in Africa it was possible for the participants to be predominately African and for the dozen partners from Europe (plus one from North America), to be made fully aware that while outside support is needed PROCMURA is owned by the African churches. Local programmes are primarily financed locally. However, an overall five year strategic plan is being prepared by a management consultant and a first draft was the substance of the Nairobi meeting's agenda. Entitled "Witnessing in a pluralistic landscape in Africa" it states that PROCMURA's overall goal is:

"To keep before the churches of Africa their responsibility for understanding Islam and Muslims in view of the churches task of interpreting the Gospel of Jesus Christ faithfully in the Muslim world and the promotion of constructive engagements with Muslims for peace in society and peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims"

With the restructuring of the AACC, PROCMURA now acts for it concerning Christian Muslim relations and this, while avoiding a degree of duplication, has added to it authority when working with churches across Africa. While in areas of violent conflict such as in Sierra Leone PROCMURA has had a mediating role, much of its work is in enabling Christians to build relationships with their Muslim sisters and brothers by addressing matters of common interest. For example, the Women's and Education Programme, coordinated by Angele Dogbe, has included:

- the merits of Christian and Islamic education in Benin
- the context of Christian Muslim relations in Burkino Faso
- issues concerning HIV/AIDS among youth in Uganda,
- the perceptions of Christian women of Muslim women and Muslim women of Christian women in Kenya
- faithful and responsible Christian witness to the gospel in an environment of Christians and Muslims in Tanzania

Work alongside other programmes has included that with the World Council of Churches and others on violence against women and with the World Lutheran Federation at a gathering in South Africa on "Mothers cry for a healthy Africa" which took place prior a two week seminar on "Interfaith Action for Peace in Africa".

The draft strategic plan (2006 – 2010) outlines PROCMURA's remarkable history since it began during the 1950s, and the recent annual reports show PROCMURA's many achievements, particularly of late. It was agreed that more work on the draft is needed and additional papers are being shared with participants so that comments on it can be received in Nairobi by 1st May. It might be that the plan will not be implemented until into 2007. As a Pan-Africa institution the experience and practice of African national churches and councils needs to be more fully acknowledged as does the need to ensure that in assessing the success of initiatives the quality of the work done is given particular emphasis. Also, now that mission agencies have fewer resources such programmes which rely on outside support to cover the costs of central administration are faced with the need to the generate income. Easy to say not easy to do. What was clear was that the able, qualified and articulate staff of PROCMURA, both in Nairobi and those working with churches across Africa, have the capacity to contribute significantly to improving Christian-Muslim relations.

Immediately after the meeting all who were present, and PROCMURA's many friends and contacts elsewhere, were shocked by the unexpected death in Scotland of Mary Gitau, PROCMURA's Team Leader – Finance and Administration. She had returned to Edinburgh to complete her MBA. The loss of such a dedicated, compassionate and professional person is a big blow. The funeral in Nairobi was attended by Walter Dunlop (Church of Scotland) whose support in a variety of ways was much appreciated by Mary's family and the PROCMURA staff and its partners. So, it is on a sombre note that this short report ends on a meeting which lived up to PROCMURA's expectations of open and friendly interaction.

*Report Produced by Gordon Holmes March 2006 and taken from Churches Together in Britain and Ireland website*

## Sri Lanka

Since the tsunami of 26th December 2004 there have been regular reports from the Relief and Rehabilitation Desk of the Church of Ceylon. In January 2006 they reported on some of the memorial events some of which were multi-religious. Some of the memorial projects double as utilities so the Diocese has enabled the building and ensured the maintenance of bus stands, public toilets, and agro-wells. The work of the R&R desk continues and some people affected by the original disaster suffered again as a result of heavy rains in November and December 2005. There has been an acknowledgement of the debt owed by the R&R Desk to the dedicated service of clergy and laity. Work continues whilst the world's media attention is long gone and with it sadly the political goodwill and co-operation so that the region has reappeared in the news because of hostilities.

## Scotland

The Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths (CRPOF) has changed its structures so that it is now on a different place of the Scottish Episcopal Church committee map. This recognises its role as being more outward looking and engaging than purely doctrinal and less of a fringe activity. Doctrine is still an issue though and it has published jointly with the Doctrine Committee Grosvenor Essay 3: The Inter - Faith Encounter Copies from : The General Synod Office, 21, Grosvenor Crescent, Edinburgh, EH12 5EE. Email : [office@scotland.anglican.org](mailto:office@scotland.anglican.org). The new Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, The Most Rev Dr Idris Jones has joined CRPOF. Our contact Dominic Ind remains with the committee but the Convenor is now Donald Reid. Donald is Associate Rector of St John's Princes Street where he is involved in creative inter-faith work, not least during the Edinburgh Festival.

## USA

Sr Ellen Francis, a New York Episcopal Priest, took part in a ten day fact-finding and friendship mission to Iran (organised by the Fellowship of Reconciliation) at the end of 2005. The interfaith delegation were able to learn first-hand about ordinary Iranians even as US and Iranian governments were adopting increasingly belligerent postures. There were also delegates from Puerto Rico and Germany. The delegates visited cultural and historic centres in Teheran, Qom, Esfahan and Shiraz. They met with representatives of the media, academics and Muslim religious leaders, as well as representatives of minority Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian communities. They also met leaders of Iranian NGOs. The delegation took with them hundreds of personal messages of friendship from ordinary Americans and delivered them to representatives of the Iranian media.

A sense of common cause that unites faith traditions was central during retiring Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold's visit to Los Angeles in January. A panel gathering of some 250 people hosted by the Los Angeles Baha'i Centre were told by Bishop Griswold "We are enriched as we seek ways in which to make common cause for the good of our communities and this nation." Centre Administrator and co-ordinator of the gathering, Randolph Dobbs said "Society is longing for direction and searching for answers. Much of what people seek can be found within the walls of neighbourhood churches, temples, mosques and other places of worship." The panel's topic was "Religion as the Dynamic Force in a Changing World." The Hon. James Nelson, a leader in the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, told the panel "Religion is already a dynamic force in a changing society.

Unfortunately, the dynamic tends to be of division, separation, exclusivity. We have to change that dynamic." Rabbi Harold Schulweis of Congregation Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California said "Each of us has a particular language, narrative, memories, but one thing is clear to me. God didn't create Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, any religion. God created all of us and gave us wisdom and heart to discover godliness. We are choosers to go beyond the rhetoric of oneness. We have to do away with sibling rivalry, the notion that 'God loves me more.' We have to relinquish the notion that there are certain people who are elect, certain people who are chosen, that certain people have absolute truth. That kind of absolutism is deleterious to everything we talk about. Can we say, you are not chosen and another rejected, we are all choosers?"

The role of women in various faith traditions is just one example of the way religions adapt to a changing social context, said Swami Atmavidyananda of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. "The caste system has been outmoded, it is being abolished," he added. "We have promoted the rights of women, and updated the idea of what karma yoga is." Rabbi Schulweis agreed: "Judaism is an evolving religious civilisation. The text may be the same. The truth of the matter is, what's important is interpretation. There was a time when a woman couldn't ascend the religious platform, be counted in a quorum, could not serve as a rabbi or cantor. Now we are much more liberal and accepting of the role of women. The only thing constant in religion is change". "This also means acceptance of the gay community," he continued, "Much of the treatment and rhetoric has been harmful, callous, cruel. We are glad to see within the Jewish community more and more appreciation of gay life. If you want to be inclusive you have to include everyone, including the person who doesn't believe in God - the atheist, the agnostic."

From the Buddhist tradition, the Venerable Wolpola Piyananda of the Darma Vijaya Buddhist Temple and the Buddhist Sangha Council of Southern California, said the spiritual journey is an ongoing process of continual enlightenment about oneself and one's surroundings. Bishop Griswold pointed to life's constant process of discovery, noting that "the unfolding of the Spirit of Truth doesn't work solely within religious construct. It works within the world. Views of the cosmos once sent

people to prison at the hands of the clergy,” he added. “Things in the Scripture described as demonic we now know were epilepsy. We are always learning more . . . We are all under construction, and my prayer is that we be faithful to that process.” Dr Muzzamil Siddiqi of the Islamic Society of North America agreed that religious texts should be interpreted within the context of society, along with reasoning and thinking. “Various groups of Muslims are very conservative and don't want anything to change; some are very liberal and they want everything to change. Some are in-between; being in-between is the most difficult,” he said. The panellists also agreed during the question-and-answer session that more tolerance and dialogue are needed. “We all have different catechisms, liturgies, creeds. What we have in common are not doctrines, but fears,” Rabbi Schulweiss said. “Before you were a Christian or a Jew or whatever you were, you were a human being. It's what touches all of us, what brings us together. We are all frightened to death of death, we are frightened of injury or destruction-there is so much mendacity in the world, as well as hopes for peace and tranquillity. The beginning of wisdom is to recognise who we are before ever joining the synagogue, mosque or temple,” he said.

“Religion has a tremendous amount to contribute to the transformation and healing of the world,” Bishop Griswold told the gathering. “Love by nature has to give itself away. The more we root and ground ourselves and our inner energies of our tradition, we become people of compassion and the world is healed to that extent.” Dr Siddiqi said that isolationist and separatist attitudes create pitfalls for religious tolerance. “We have to work for economic justice, promote ethical values, remove the things that are breaking families apart and finally, we have to work together to take away the culture of violence. If we can solve problems peacefully, there is a great future for humanity.” The Hon. Nelson added that the golden rule, common to all faiths, has been extended by the Baha'i to mean: Love your neighbour more than yourself. We are still having difficulty defining who our neighbour is. The disciples asked Jesus who is my neighbour and he answered with the story of the Good Samaritan. He created a new dynamic. Our neighbour is every human being on the planet.

## **Suggestions for Prayer**

For those working to defend human rights in Bangladesh, for an end to the smear campaign against Ahmadiyya's and Hindus there.

For the Association of South East Asian Nations – ASEAN as it seeks to persuade the government of Myanma/Burma back on the road to democracy.

For the people of Sri Lanka that they may not lose the peace and co-operation among communities as they continue to rebuild after the Tsunami.

The Sudan where peace is extremely fragile.

For the family and friends of Bishop William Waqo Boru in Kenya and of Mary Gitau also in Kenya.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) that it may continue its time of political transition in peace.

*As I write Israel continues to target Lebanon in retaliation for Hezbollah attacks, pray that those working for peace in the Middle East may not lose hope.*