

APPENDIX N

**Report on the Porvoo Communion Consultation on Inter-faith Relations held in Oslo
from November 30th to December 3rd 2003**

INTRODUCTION

Within the Porvoo Communion of European Churches, Advent 2003 began with a Consultation on Inter-faith Relations held in Oslo from November 30th to December 3rd and hosted by the Church of Norway. Representatives were drawn from the Porvoo Churches, Lutherans from Norway, Sweden, Iceland and Finland, Anglicans from England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, together with those representing the Churches in Latvia and Denmark who are unofficially linked to the Porvoo Communion. Observers came from the EKD (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland) and the Lutheran World Federation. The Anglican Interfaith Network was represented by Dr Clare Amos of the Church of England. The Archbishop of Dublin chaired the Consultation and Canon Desmond Sinnamon with the Bishop of Clogher participated on behalf of the Church of Ireland.

CONTEXT

The Bishop of Oslo, Dr Gunnar Stalsett, put the Consultation in the context of the evolving social, cultural and religious map of an enlarged Europe by stating that on Turkey's becoming a full member of the European Union there will be as many European Muslims as there are European Protestants. This surely is an arresting realization and one which brings to the forefront of the mind the question of the Lord Jesus so often conveniently side-stepped in our own island Christianity: 'And who is my neighbour?' Dr Stalsett's statement was explored by members of the Consultation who reported on inter-faith issues in their own countries and churches to the mutual enlightenment and benefit of all participants. Iceland, with a total population of less than 300,000, has 25 specified religious organizations. Ireland has 7 faith communities with numbers ranging from 200 to 27,000 alongside the members of the Christian community in all its extensive and taut diversity.

All those involved recognized the desire of their churches to work towards good sustainable relationships among world faiths particularly where Christianity as a religion of generosity of spirit living and working in the name of the Prince of Peace is an underlying assumption of the host culture. Into this culture many members of other world faiths have entered in the recent and near past as economic migrants, refugees and seekers of asylum after enduring unspeakable cruelty, deprivation and bereavement. They have become our neighbours.

A LOCAL ISSUE

Ireland has the following interfaith organizations: The Northern Ireland Interfaith Forum, The Three Faiths Forum of Ireland and The Irish Council of Christians and Jews. Ireland is further challenged by an average rate of immigration of 10,000 persons per year and by the regular influx of people from Africa, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The Republic of Ireland accommodates asylum seekers in 24 counties through a programme of dispersal whereas in Northern Ireland asylum seekers are accommodated overwhelmingly in the greater Belfast area. The Church of Ireland has challenged itself in its members through the Sectarianism Education Programme and The Hard Gospel to cope with difference. This has been undertaken in the recognition that we ourselves have contributed significantly to division within the witness of Christianity at home. Ecumenism freezes and defrosts with alarming unpredictability. Meanwhile interfaith relations remain largely unaddressed from within the institution, parts of Dublin and Cork being notable and known exceptions. There are daily opportunities for neighbourliness, for graciousness, for hospitality and for respect in the name of Christ Jesus for all concerned. If the love of God is our work, we need to be proactive rather than passive. Pastoral theology will drive the pace of theoretical theology. The question being asked of us right now is: Can we take our place as participants rather than as spectators?

CONTENT

Throughout its four days, the Consultation rooted its reflections in Scripture and in the theology of mission. Participants addressed strong and combative passages such as 1 Corinthians 9.16-23; Matthew 10; Luke 4.16-31; John 3.16-21 and 31-36 alongside worship both formal and informal in the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

The interfaith work on the ground in Gronland, an inner-city Oslo suburb, in the Lutheran Parish gave a perspective on the ways in which the existence of a state church which is Christian actively benefits members of another world faith, in this case Islam. Religion is a public concern in Norway. Opportunities have been taken over ten years to build up trust in community and political life. One particular result has been that in 1997 an extreme Right Wing Party which played the racist card immediately found that it had overplayed its hand. In Norway the State funds religions in their diversity while retaining Christianity as its State religion. The inter-relation of both faiths is to be seen in the fact that the current President of the Norwegian Islamic Council is a woman and a convert. This workshop was complemented by a visit to the Central Jamatt-e Ahl-e Sunnat Mosque in the same district.

A second field trip was to visit Oslo's Emmaus Dialogue Centre and to experience the developments in meditation between Christianity and Buddhism in Paulus kirke. The ingredients of this exploration were: meditation, retreat, silence, the deposit of Christian spirituality, working with theological language and multi-lateral interfaith dialogue. Twelve

Standing Committee – Report 2004

years after its inception the real benefits were being felt. Striking feature of this project have been the interfaith marking of Jubilee 2000 and shared preparation to mark together the great festivals of each religion. Those intimately involved in this work commented that once understanding of the other's religion stops, respect takes over in the seeming void of incomprehension. Being in dialogue is an activity of community. I could not but think back to the potential for good which the Sectarianism Education Project might have were it to be infused with such a spirit of respect for others as we grapple with its challenges for good.

In both situations the voice of realism dictated the expectation of a slow pace with plenty of opportunity for the development of friendships as a precursor to formal dialogue.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

The Consultation has developed Guidelines for Interfaith Encounter to be considered by the churches constituent of the Porvoo Communion. They are perforce limited at this stage by the recognition that much, but by no means all, of the interfaith initiative comes from the Christian parties involved. The theological presuppositions of these Guidelines are unashamedly Trinitarian: God is generous both in creation and in salvation; Jesus Christ shows us the radiance of God's glory and opens the way to God; the presence of the Spirit is known through the fruits of the Spirit. Creation, mercy and grace on the part of the God of Christian revelation and human discernment frame, therefore, any Christian interfaith encounter which is itself an essential precursor of any dialogue.

The twelve suggested pointers are given to all members of the churches, lay and clerical, for consideration towards their application and investment in daily life. As we ourselves are discovering, both painfully and progressively, potential for life in our own church lies in the hands and hearts of the laity as the institution comes to terms with its own advanced clericalism. These twelve pointers, if accepted, provide opportunities for such encounter on an individual basis in ways which can challenge for good the institutions and those who wield power in them to be gracious in their authority, faithful in their witness and generous in their humanity. The twelve suggestions are: building long-term trust; speaking truthfully about the other; sharing our faith; changing religious commitment; safeguarding the freedom to believe; coming together before God; responding to changing societies; working for the common good; educating and nurturing in faith; supporting family life; involving women and men; understanding international issues.

WHAT WE CAN DO

The cloud of 9/11, as it will ever be called, still hangs over the self-understanding and self-confidence of nations and individuals East and West. Members of the Consultation are well aware that within all our churches Christians differ, sometimes violently, about the relations between interfaith dialogue and evangelism. They request that such differences be discussed

Standing Committee – Report 2004

respectfully and openly. The criticism of others requires the maturity of self-criticism. Honesty about real differences can and should challenge generalities whether they be bland or strident. It is in the local situation that the love of God can flourish.

† Michael Clogher:
24.xii.2003