

COMMITTEE FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY:

Seconder: Rev Patrick Comerford (Dublin and Glendalough)

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

Your grace,

As a new member of the Committee for Christian Unity it gives me great pleasure to second this report.

Last week, I was in the small Greek Orthodox Church in Arbour Hill in Dublin as the parishioners celebrated Easter according to the Eastern calendar. The liturgy lasted for hours, from just after dark on Saturday night until the early hours of Sunday morning. And it was conducted in at least five languages: Greek, Romanian, Russian, Arabic and (as a minority language) English.

There were a number of clear lessons: I no longer believe that people will refuse to come to church on Saturday nights; I no longer believe that the liturgy has to be shortened to make it acceptable to a large number of people; I no longer believe that the liturgy has to be shorn of dignity and symbolism to be relevant to our postmodern society; and I no longer accept that people will not travel long distances to go to a church that offers them meaning, hope, joy and a sense of belonging and of community.

This was a lively experience of Christian unity in practice: so many nationalities, so many languages, so many ethnic groups, all focussed on the need to take the light of the Risen Christ out into the darkness of the world.

But it was also indicative of the way things are changing in Ireland when it comes to discussing Christian unity and diversity. That Saturday night and Sunday morning, I could have had a similar experience in at least three other churches in the Dublin area: the Romanian Orthodox Parish using the chapel at Belvedere College and about to move into Christ Church, Leeson Park, the Russian Orthodox parish using our former parish church in Harold's Cross; and the Coptic Orthodox Parish in Bray.

The church scene in Ireland is changing rapidly. There are at least 20,000 Russian-speakers in the Republic, and perhaps 20,000 Romanians in Ireland. Where we once spoke of the four main churches in Ireland, Orthodoxy now has at least as strong a presence in the Republic as Methodism and Presbyterianism.

And there are other large and growing churches on this island. Walk down through the Parnell Street and Moore Street areas of Dublin some day and see not only the variety of African shops and hairdressers, but discover the variety of African-based churches that now have an established presence in this city. How many of the people going to those churches were cradle Anglicans before they left Nigeria or some other country? How many of the Latvians, Estonians and Lithuanians now working here legally as EU citizens were, before they left those Baltic states, members of churches that the Church of Ireland is in communion with through the Porvoo Communion?

And who has any way of even beginning to know the number of Christians among the 40,000 or more Chinese now living on this island.

Now, I concede, some members of general synod may have a number of questions about these new churches. Indeed, some of these questions have an element of validity to them. But I prefer, in the first instance, to see these churches as a gift rather than a threat ... a gift and perhaps even a challenge to us.

You should experience the wonderful gifts members of those churches have brought to the Church of Ireland through the joyous atmosphere the members of the Discovery Gospel Choir have brought to the international services in Saint George's and Saint Thomas's Church in the Inner City! Think of how the Greeks, Romanians, Russians and Copts can teach us about the joy of the Easter faith!

They bring with them exciting attitudes about the Church as extended family and community, and they express it in their singing, gatherings, and meals together. "Taste and see how good the Lord is."

But I am afraid that the new proposals on immigration and asylum may mean we could be in danger of losing those gifts, those presents, that joy.

One of the interesting communities among us that is growing rapidly is the Islamic Community. Today there are 20,000 to 30,000 Muslims in the Republic, and the number is increasing. I was particularly pleased with the warm welcome the Archbishop of Dublin received when a small group of us visited the main Sunni and Shia mosques in Dublin prior to a recent CMS visit to Egypt. It was a welcome that was only a foretaste of the enthusiastic welcome we received from Muslim and Christian leaders in Egypt.

Despite the doom and gloom that appears to dominate media coverage of Muslim-Christian relations, this part of dialogue has become manifestly more positive in recent years. And this is the experience of all Churches. How could we have imagined a decade ago that the President of Iran, a Shia Muslim ayatollah, would be warmly greeted in the Vatican by an archbishop and be seated alongside other Islamic leaders in the front row at the Pope's funeral?

But any steps taken in Muslim-Christian dialogue and inter-faith dialogue must always bear in mind that our first responsibilities are to remain true to the Christian message and to retain the trust and confidence of the Christian communities for whom we speak. That's why this committee, in accepting that its remit includes issues related to inter-faith encounters, is anxious, nevertheless, that those encounters must always take place within the context of our primary responsibility to dialogue with other Christians.

The new churches and the new faiths in Ireland offer us many opportunities and many gifts. But it is now time for us in the Church of Ireland to also consider what gifts and opportunities we can share with them too. There is no place for prejudice based on ignorance. There is plenty of room to explore, to share, to enjoy each other's gifts and hospitality, and they offer us in the Church of Ireland.

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