

## Committee for Interreligious Dialogue

### Synod Conversations



#### Executive Summary

The Committee for Interreligious Dialogue organised two conversations with friends from other faiths, one with members of the Jewish faith and the other with friends from the Bahai, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh faiths.

All expressed gratitude for Pope Francis, his love of humanity and his witness to the importance of good interfaith relations. They were also grateful for the contribution of the Committee for Interreligious Dialogue, particularly the annual letters of greeting and the annual interfaith reception.

They recognised the important contribution that individual Catholics had made to the development of interfaith relations and interfaith structures in Scotland but felt that institutional involvement was lacking.

It was obvious that all our faiths face the same problems: a decline in numbers; young people no longer finding traditional religion relevant while other young people were becoming more traditional; interfaith marriages; control of clergy; moral issues such as homosexuality.

Older views of one another's faith and the legacy of the past have led to barriers of misunderstanding. There is still a mistrust of the other and a fear of being converted. This shows the need for interfaith education and dialogue.

Local neighbourhood dialogues should be encouraged which would allow for

- The involvement of parish priests
- The recognition in sermons and work of the parish of other faiths and interfaith relations
- The involvement of more young people to shadow the more experienced
- The working with people of other faiths to meet common concerns and needs
- The witness to a common concern for the local area and the importance of faith in society

#### .Contribution by a member of the Committee

As people of diversity and faith, we are only starting out on a journey of discovering together the richness in our diversity of cultures and faiths. Dialogue and working together on local, national, social and economic issues will draw us ever closer together.

I reflect as someone who comes from another continent.... And after many years in GB, having been living in Glasgow in the last 5 years.

I dream of a Church that is truly human – where people feel nurtured & secure in their own faith which lies at the very core of their identity but, at the same time, can relate to people who are religiously & culturally different from them & regards diversity as enrichment and not a threat.

I dream of a Church that focuses more on relationship and helps people to dialogue and understand the spiritual richness in people of all faiths & value systems: a Church that encourages people not to be satisfied with ritual & ceremony but helps people to appreciate the value of life.

I understand that priests are overworked & overburdened but leadership within the Church impacts upon how the “faithful” think. Could the clergy create greater awareness of Holy Father's own efforts to work for fraternity? Did the typical parish even mention the 4 Feb event to mark the Day for Fraternity? Or Holocaust Memorial Day?

#### Conversation 1

Present were two members from the Orthodox Jewish community; a married couple of whom one was from the Reform Jewish community and the other Catholic; three members of the Committee

#### Positive Comments

1. The good relations that now exists between the Jewish Community and the Catholic Church and the sense that more unites that separates our two communities.
2. The good and growing relationship between Garnethill Synagogue and St Aloysius Church, particularly with the current parish priest
3. The recognition that both communities are facing the same issues and challenges such as declining numbers attending synagogues and churches.
4. The recognition of the similarities with other faiths eg. a comparison between Arabic and Hebrew shows the similarities in Judaism and Islam
5. Xenophobia decreasing in the younger generation

## **Concerns**

1. Ignorance of one another's faith and the faith of others. Older views of one another's faith are a barrier to understanding and have led to it being taboo for some Jews to visit a church or even mention Jesus.
2. A fear of admitting to being Jewish because of antisemitism or even being religious in a secular society
3. The divisions of people (eg. Celtic and Rangers) into supporters of Israel or Palestine without knowing anything of the reality of the situation.
4. No mention of other faiths in church and synagogue even when the church is situated in, for example, an area with high Jewish population
5. A recognition that both our faiths are facing the same moral issues eg. how to approach homosexuality. Our religions should not be judgemental about people's life stances. Because of this many are walking away from religion.
6. In general, the non-acceptance of interfaith marriages – in past parents considered children who married outside the faith as dead – in Judaism they would say prayers for the dead, in Catholicism they would not attend weddings and cut off contact with children.
7. Many young people no longer finding religious services relevant in both synagogue and Church because they don't understand the language or understand the repetitiveness of the services. On the other hand, some young people are becoming more traditional and right- wing in their approach to their faith.
8. The control clergy have over certain elements of religion – eg. admitting people to the sacraments, refusing blessings or Jewish and non-Jewish partner being able to be buried in the same grave
9. The position of women who are excluded from leading/saying certain prayers or conducting services
10. The tendency of leaders and clergy in our faiths to be inward looking with no comments or statement on issues facing society and the community

## **A Way Forward?**

1. More dialogue at grassroot level – during recent work for Afghani refugees at Giffnock Synagogue there was good dialogue with Muslim mothers and a recognition that all their children are discriminated.
2. More neighbourhood dialogues and working together to weave ourselves into the wider community. Members of our faith should be aware of the faiths in their area. Shared campus parishes.
3. Acceptance of interfaith marriages – this is going to grow in a multifaith society, and our faiths should be more tolerant than in the past. Many religious young people will marry people of no faith and the concerns this might cause parents.

4. Our faiths should be less judgemental about those whom they consider have stepped out of line. Life is not black and white and there are different ways in which people relate to their faith – all should be accepted
5. Ensuring that conflicts abroad which are associated with religions do not disrupt good relations here in Scotland
6. The traditional dialogue between Christianity and Judaism has been the Council of Christians and Jews but perhaps this should be extended to include Muslims
7. We live in a society which is made up of refugees and immigrants – perhaps refugees and working with them could help regenerate our faith communities.

## **Conversation 2**

Present were friends from the Baha'i, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh faiths, the parish priest of St Aloysius Garnethill and 2 members of the committee.

### **Positive Comments**

1. Appreciation for Pope Francis and his work for dialogue which builds bridges between people and allows communities to move forward in friendship. The signing of the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together by the Pope and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University was a significant step as will be the proposed visit to Lebanon in June this year. It was noted that the Pope showed a genuine love for the whole of humanity, not just his own Church.
2. The good relations between the Church and other communities, notably the growing friendship and dialogue with the Shia community that has grown over the past 3 years. This has helped the Shia community be more open to others.
3. Annual letters from the Vatican and the Scottish Bishops which are valued as they show respect for and a knowledge of the other faith as well as relating that to Catholic belief and practice.
4. The annual reception for faith communities organized by the Committee and in the past hosted by Archbishop Conti
5. The involvement of the Bishops' Secretary for Interreligious Dialogue in the work of interfaith which spans thirty + years and has supported the development of interfaith at local and national level. If there had not been this involvement and participation interfaith relations would not have developed in Scotland.

### **Concerns**

1. The Church has good dialogue with Shia community – perhaps more dialogue with other smaller communities. Smaller communities have difficulty establishing themselves and places of worship and find it difficult to approach larger institutional groups. This can be because they do not know the protocol or have low self-esteem.
2. While interfaith friendships are expanding there is still a lot of mistrust of the other and a fear of being converted or encouraged to do so.
3. We have a great responsibility to share our insights from inter-religious dialogue with our communities and also practice those insights.
4. When meeting people of other faiths, it should not just be an information exercise but an experience where our humanity is shared. From the dialogue between Shia and Sunni Muslims, both communities have learned not to begin a dialogue with questions like 'why are you like this'?
5. There is a lot of preaching in religion but not so much action. Preaching should come after prayer and practice but this not happening– young people see through this and know if people are honest and live up to what they say
6. Young people in many of our faiths are no longer coming to places of worship – they are too busy with other things or do not see what is happening as relevant to their present lives. There is also a

tendency among some young people to be harping back to the past to a more traditional approach to religion – eg. the way things are done in India.

7. Difficult to get local parish priest involved in interfaith events or respond to invitations. Clergy need to be encouraged and told about the importance of interfaith and meaningful conversations. Interfaith dialogue is important for communities and necessary for communities to be healthy – good to look for common concerns. Always same faces at interfaith meetings – this is a sign of weakness
8. How to get more men involved in dialogue – at present women are more likely to be involved.
9. Important for people to learn how to talk to others and find young people to continue the work. Some young people are willing to do this.
10. Interreligious education is important and a grounding in world faiths should be given in faith education and clergy training
11. Despite good work of individuals there is no contact between institutions – places of worship have no contact with Catholic Church and never been invited to a catholic event – it was suggested that all religions have a sense of mission and there can be a reluctance to invite others in case it is seen as proselytization.
12. Legacy of the past is a barrier to good relations.
13. How do we communicate the true essence of our faiths – perhaps more conversation about the values at the heart of our faiths

### **A Way Forward?**

1. More people involved in the local context. A christmas card from the local church would be appreciated – so too carol singing at Christmas. Perhaps a card to recognize other festivals. This would help communities get to know one another as well as clergy.
2. It was important to put more effort into persuading Catholic priests and Protestant ministers to take up inter-faith activities at the local level. They perhaps should add training to the seminary curriculum to promote inter-faith dialogue and how to make it happen in the parishes and schools.
3. It is important to stress that we are neighbours and need to understand the theology of neighbourliness. It would be good to share open days.
4. If want to influence outside communities, we must witness to our faiths through action together.
5. Living together in Scotland must have open and honest dialogue.
6. Imams, clergy should talk about life in Scotland and address common concerns.
7. Funding from government for youth education is a possibility – bringing young people together in youth camps
8. Perhaps bring 2 younger people to shadow older people at interfaith gatherings and meetings
9. Opportunities for personal conversations - at Parliament of World Religions in Barcelona the Sikh community served meals to 10,000 people daily – this allowed for good interpersonal conversations, but the subsequent Parliament of World Religions did not allow the Sikh community to do this and as a result many participants commented that it was so busy and did not allow for interpersonal exchange.
10. Catholics should make contact, go to a Gurdwara, share a vegetarian meal and get to know one another. In this way, trust will grow between the communities.

### **A Personal Experience with the Catholic Church/Catholic individuals.** Dr. Maureen Sier ( Baha'i )

**Early Years** I was raised in NE Scotland in a town called Elgin. My parents were marginally Protestant and so I attended Sunday School in St Giles Church and learnt a little about Christianity from attending weekly classes (from around 5 years old).

I first became aware that there were a group of people called Catholics when I went to primary school. Just 5 minutes' walk from East End Primary School (which I attended) was St Sylvester's Primary School – the only faith-based school in Elgin.

As a young child the words Protestant and Catholic did not mean much – my 'religious feelings' were towards the stories of Jesus and I also loved going to Church services and enjoyed the singing and the sense of the 'sacred'.

As a young teenager I was given a bike, and with friends, cycled to Pluscarden Abbey (about 6 miles from Elgin) and I was really moved by being in such an incredibly beautiful, peaceful, religious place. Pluscarden Abbey is home to a community of Catholic Benedictine monks and this was my first non-Protestant religious experience. It was while exploring Pluscarden Abbey and its grounds that I decided that there really was a God and that I needed to know more. So, I guess you could say that it was a **Catholic experience that set me on a religious quest.**

### **Adult life**

My 'quest' led me to become a Baha'i at the age of 17 and in later years my sister married a Catholic and my aunt and her whole family converted to the Catholic Church and have remained faithful members since conversion. So, my family is an interesting mix of Baha'is, Protestant Christians, Catholics and non-religious.

By age 26, I was married with 4 children. In my 30's I attended University and majored in Cultural History with Religious Studies. This was a more formal understanding of religion and it was not until doing my PhD in the 1990s in the Pacific Island of Samoa that I began to develop a deeper understanding of the Catholic Church. My PhD was on religion and gender in the Pacific and the Catholic Church, and particularly the experience of the religious sisters, formed a central part of one of the chapters of my PhD. I found my **engagement with the religious sisters of Samoa** and with the wider Catholic Church there **very positive**. Some key Catholic individuals stand out because they became life-long friends and also had a huge impact on my life;

- Dr Emma Kruz Vaii (a leading Samoan Academic and committed Catholic). Emma recently became the Chancellor of the University of Samoa. We engaged regularly in **Catholic/Baha'i interfaith conversations** and continue those to the present day.
- Paul O'Callaghan (High Commissioner of Samoa who went on to work for **Caritas** in Australia) – Paul despite his role as Commissioner went weekly to the Catholic Old People's Home to shave the old men and be of service. This impacted greatly on me, he was a great example of faith in action.
- Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Tupuola Tufuga Efi who was elected as Samoa's Head of State from 2007 -2017. He is also a committed Catholic and a leading academic and at his invitation I was asked to speak at an interfaith conference that he organised in Samoa. In turn, many years later, I was able to invite Tupua to co-host, with Interfaith Scotland, a conference on the Indigenous and Interfaith approach to the climate crisis (held in St Andrews University, Scotland).

I think it is safe to say that my early interfaith engagement with members of the Catholic Church was positive, life affirming and continues to enrich me.

### **Interfaith in Scotland**

On becoming Development Officer (in 2002) for Interfaith Scotland (previously called The Scottish Interfaith Council) my **mentor, friend and interfaith inspiration has been a Catholic sister, Sr Isabel Smyth**. Although I had engaged in interfaith dialogue while at Aberdeen University and during my PhD studies in Samoa, it was Sr Isabel who helped me to integrate my interfaith experience into my work, my

wider religious experience as a Baha'i and indeed probably has helped me to make Interfaith friendship a core aspect of my life here in Scotland.

There are so many ways that the Catholic Church enriches the interfaith engagement in Scotland that I will probably have to just list them below but I want to say that my interfaith experience has been enhanced and greatly influenced by friendship with key members of the Catholic community.

Below are some ways the Catholic Church positively impacts on good interfaith relations in Scotland:

- Sr Isabel Smyth was a founding member of Interfaith Scotland
- The Catholic Community have been active members of Interfaith Scotland since its inception
- The Catholic Bishop's Committee for Inter-religious Dialogue continues to promote the engagement of the Catholic Church in Scotland with those of other faiths
- Archbishop Conti (until his retirement) and now Bishop McGee have served faithfully on the Scottish Religious Leaders Forum since 2002.
- Archbishop Conti hosted an annual interfaith gathering which was very positively received by members of diverse faiths and was always very welcoming and well attended
- The publication of The Pope's encyclical Laudato Si has had a very positive impact on the interfaith engagement with the climate crisis both here in Scotland and globally.

In a 'full-circle' sort of way I can also say that Interfaith Moray held its meetings in St Sylvesters Church in Elgin at the invitation of Deacon McQuad and having the interfaith meetings in a recognised place of worship (the café attached to the Church) did give the smallish group a real boost. Deacon McQuad was always very supportive of the local interfaith engagement.

### **Engagement of the Catholic Church with the Baha'i Community of Scotland**

I think it is probably fair to say that the main engagement of the Catholic Church with the Baha'i community in Scotland has come directly from the initiatives of Sister Isabel Smyth and to some extent via the Catholic Bishops' Committee for Inter-Religious Dialogue and also from the support of Archbishop Conti.

Every year the Catholic Church send greetings to the Baha'i community for their special holy days. This is widely appreciated by the community and the messages received are also shared across the whole of the UK and beyond.

Archbishop Conti very kindly spoke at a public event held for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Birth of Baha'u'llah the founder of the Baha'i Faith.

Sr Isabel Smyth attends Baha'i events on a fairly regular basis and is currently engaged in weekly 'conversations' with a member of the Baha'i Council of Scotland.

### **Thoughts going forward**

I would say most of the formal engagement of the Catholic Church with the Baha'i community comes via personal initiative and not necessarily formally via the Catholic Church and this may be something that could be put in place going forward. The Baha'i Community has bi-lateral interfaith conversations on a regular basis with the Shi'a Muslim community and a similar initiative might be good to have with the Catholic Community.