

Report of a Regional Consultation of the Network for Inter Faith Concerns in the Anglican Communion (NIFCON) held at United Theological College, Bangalore, 30th August – 4th September 2003

A. Meeting in India

1. It is important that this first NIFCON regional consultation was held in India. This is a country marked by a rich religious plurality, in which Christians necessarily relate to people from a wide variety of different faiths and communities. The Indian Christian Churches, including the Church of North India and the Church of South India, have taken this challenge seriously, both in their evangelism and in their dialogue, and we have learnt much from the very varied ways in which Indian Christians are engaging with their context. Their example also has an added significance for the churches of the Anglican Communion through the presence of Indian diaspora communities in many places overseas: this is a country which cannot be seen in isolation from other parts of the world. Alongside relations between Christians and Muslims, we affirm that Christian-Hindu relations should be taken seriously by the Communion, and we also recognise the need to devote attention to dialogue with Buddhists and with other religious traditions with their roots in India.
2. We were particularly grateful for the welcome and hospitality that we received from the local church in Bangalore, and especially from Bishop Vasanthakumar and the Diocese of Karnataka Central. Bishop Vasanthakumar's affirmation of our effort to engage with the local church context was a positive endorsement of the process of the consultation.
3. The consultation heard of the problems facing Christians, in common with Muslims and other religious communities, as a result of the continuing force of the caste system. There can be tensions between a commitment to interreligious dialogue and a commitment to the liberation and empowerment of dalit and adivasi (tribal) people. It can be very problematic for some Christians to engage in a constructive dialogue with representatives of a system which they experience as oppressive. In fact, all religious traditions in India have to some extent inculturated themselves within a caste-ridden society, and there is a need for a dialogue within each faith about this. The strength of the caste system is currently being reasserted by resurgent Hindu nationalism.
4. The Hindutva movement is a serious danger to the Christian Churches, to Muslims, and to other minority religious communities. We were deeply moved to hear of the sufferings of the Church in Gujarat under persecution, and we are also aware of the difficult situation in the North East and in other parts of India. Central to this issue is the freedom of people to share their faith with others and to convert to another religion. 'Anti-conversion' laws have over the years been enacted in several different states, and are being applied with growing stringency. These statutes seriously affect the fundamental rights, guaranteed in the Indian Constitution, to profess, practice and propagate one's religion, as well as the right to privacy, and the plurality and integrity of Indian society. No dialogue in the Indian context can be authentic if it does not address this issue, which is an area where the Indian churches need and deserve the support of their fellow Christians in the Anglican Communion and more widely.
5. Intolerant, aggressive and divisive attitudes – which are popularly grouped together as 'fundamentalism' – appear to be a growing force in all religious communities in India, including among Christians. We feel strongly that there needs to be a deeper engagement with this phenomenon, a clear awareness of the different currents involved, and a realistic analysis of the reasons for their appeal. At the same time, we want to affirm the importance of the Indian Churches' stance of solidarity with people of different faiths and with all of good will in working for social peace, harmony and fundamental human rights. In a powerful presentation, Sathianathan Clarke spoke to us of the Church's mission to reclaim local neighbourhoods for diversity and harmony. He suggested that this vocation could be symbolised by

three textile metaphors drawn from the New Testament: the Church as patch, mending the tears in ruptured communities; the Church as fringe, reaching out to the excluded and marginalized; and the Church as garment, quilting social life together in a harmony made out of diversity.

B. Inter Faith Relations in Difficult Situations

1. The challenges facing the Church in some parts of India have highlighted for us wider issues about the contribution which can be made to difficult interreligious situations by those committed to building good relations between people of different faiths. We believe that it is crucially important that Christian inter faith work should embrace advocacy for the Church in places where it is under persecution, or where its freedom to propagate the Gospel, to engage in mission and ministry, and to welcome new members is denied. More widely, we recognise an obligation to be in solidarity with all religious minorities where their fundamental rights are under attack.
2. Dialogue can make an important contribution to this work of advocacy, both in the local context through Christians' engagement with the complex and changing realities of their own religious context, and also through relations developed with people of different faiths in other parts of the Communion. Advocacy may involve using contacts with governments and other organisations. It must be founded on prayer for the suffering church, and we recognise that this needs to be enabled in a practical way – for example, by using Anglican and ecumenical cycles of prayer to focus on the situation of suffering Churches. At the same time, we know that we all have much to learn from the faithful witness of Christian communities undergoing the experience of persecution; they can teach us in a new way something of the meaning of the Cross and Resurrection at work among God's faithful people today.
3. We have been made very aware of the problems which are resulting around the world from a growth in 'fundamentalism' in all religious traditions, while recognising the difficulties involved in a simplistic or dismissive use of this word. Our meeting in India was very conscious of the divisive effects of resurgent Hindutva ideology. Members of the Inter Anglican Standing Commission on Mission and Evangelism drew our attention to the ways in which Churches in Nigeria, Sudan, the Middle East and other parts of the Communion are suffering as a result of Islamisation movements. We also need honestly to acknowledge that intolerant, aggressive and divisive attitudes are to be found among many Christians, and that some methods of evangelism display an insensitivity and hostility towards the religious beliefs and practices of others which are likely to provoke negative reactions in return.
4. In divided societies and a divided world where religious difference is often used or perceived as a cause of conflict and destruction, we affirm that working for reconciliation between different faith communities is a responsibility laid upon us by God, and that as Christians we must do this in partnership with members of other faith communities, with secular organisations, and with all people of good will. Our vocation to share in God's work of reconciliation requires us to strive to build up open, trusting and honest relationships with our neighbours of other religions, even in situations where this is very difficult. We see such interreligious reconciliation as an integral part of the mission of God in which we share.

C. Inter Faith Dialogue

1. Dialogue plays a very important part in inter faith relations, and can follow many different patterns. A widely used typology which we found helpful distinguishes four forms in particular: dialogue of life, where people naturally relate together across religious boundaries in the course of their daily living; social dialogue, where people of various faiths collaborate with one another in the cause of peace and justice; intellectual dialogue, developing a dialogue which can explore different beliefs and their claims to truth; and spiritual dialogue, where people open themselves to the force of one another's religious experiences. In addition to these four, we were privileged to witness what might be described as a fifth form of dialogue: the sharing of the cultural and artistic expressions of different traditions. The power of this dimension of dialogue was made clear to us in a visit to the ashram of the artist Jyoti Sahi, in an exhibition of paintings by Solomon Raj, and in dazzling sequences performed by the Nityavani dance troupe.

2. Many of the stories which we have heard could be described as instances of 'social dialogue'. Most focus on building up partnerships to address common issues of shared concern to different communities, though we recognise that dialogues can equally well develop out of serious disagreements over social issues. Through working together in practical ways, Christians and people of other faiths can come to know and to trust one another at a deeper level. This so-called 'diapraxis' seems often to have a more immediate relevance than a dialogue of ideas and beliefs, but we feel that the 'intellectual' and 'social' forms of dialogue should be seen as complementary to one another; they both build on the dialogue of life between people in community, and can in turn open the way to the 'spiritual' dialogue of religious experience. All this poses a challenge to NIFCON to identify the particular forms of dialogue to which it can most effectively make a contribution.
3. We recognise a need to gather, share and celebrate stories and examples of good practice in dialogue from around the Communion, and see this as an important part of NIFCON's work. The consultation itself was considerably enriched through our taking time to hear such illustrations from seven parts of the world. (Africa, the United States, Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom) We acknowledge the need for more women and more young people to be involved in organised dialogue events, so that all can benefit from the particular contributions that they can bring. We hope that Christians can be encouraged to see dialogue as an arena in which they can both express their own deepest identity, and discover new depths in that identity. To engage in dialogue effectively and faithfully, we need spiritual formation in both humility and confidence founded on faith; this sets a major educational task for the Church. Worship, drawing on a variety of spiritual traditions, formed an important framework for the consultation, and we had a fundamental commitment to 'root in prayer' our intellectual and practical explorations.
4. There are some sharp questions which need to be asked of the theory and practice of dialogue. It is important to be clear from whose perspective dialogue is being conducted, to be aware of power dynamics and of the various motivations which bring people to the dialogue table, and to seek to formulate immediate and long-term goals of the dialogue. It might be helpful to develop some guidelines for good practice for dialogue (or to adapt existing guidelines), while also recognising a need for flexibility.
5. It should not be assumed that dialogue is only concerned with establishing points of agreement between different faiths. Christians need fully to recognise the 'otherness' of other religions, and to see that the acknowledgement and exploration of difference is an important dimension of dialogue. Although we do not believe that seeking converts from one religion to another should be seen as the goal of dialogue, it is important that the possibility of such conversion – in any direction – should be accepted as a valid outcome of the conversation. Conversion is experienced by many Christians as a liberating and life-giving turning point in their lives. This can be unsettling for some models of dialogue and some theologies of religion, but the freedom of all to choose and to follow their own paths of faith is crucially important.

D. Christian Theology, Mission and Dialogue

1. Much of our consultation was taken up in biblical study, seeking to derive guidance for our current situation from scriptural texts recording the experience of the people of God in formative times. We want to affirm this as an appropriate and a fruitful method for Anglicans to explore the theological bases of their involvement in inter faith relations. The four New Testament passages we read together (Acts 17, Matthew 28, 2 Corinthians 4-5, John 4) were rich and diverse in their teaching on both dialogue and mission; we know that study of the Hebrew scriptures would further add to this richness and diversity. We sense that Anglicans need to reflect further on the methods that they use in relating their current praxis of inter faith relations – which is itself extremely diverse – to scripture and tradition. We ourselves are hoping to publish in some form the insights we derived from our Bible study sessions.
2. Michael Amaladoss, in a lucid survey of contemporary Catholic theology of mission and dialogue, drew our attention to the two different horizons against which Christians are called: the universal goal of the Kingdom, and the specific goal of the Church. Linked to the tension between these two is the way in which the understanding of God as creating is linked to that of God as saving. This in turn sets before us the challenge of grounding a theology for mission and dialogue in our confession of God as Trinity.

3. In particular, we recognise the need for a greater emphasis in Anglican theology on the place of the Spirit in the encounter of Christians with people of other faiths. Recent ecumenical writing has pointed to the dispensation of the Spirit, in its free and surprising activity and in the evidence of its fruits in human lives, as a proper locus within which to understand inter faith relations. This cannot, though, be divorced from, or set against, a Christological approach: it is in Jesus Christ that we find the norm for our engagement with people of other faiths, and he himself points us to the Spirit's work. The experience of the Spirit in encounter can in turn transform and renew our own faith; we see theology as not only equipping us for dialogue and evangelism but also as growing out of our sharing in these dimensions of the overall mission of God.
4. The development of an accessible theology of religious plurality is a priority within Anglicanism, and such a theology cannot be formulated in isolation from the whole of the Christian community. We also believe that such theology needs to be contextually based, and the methodology we employed at this consultation sought to model this. It is always necessary to ask about the presuppositions on which any theology is based, and to recognise that there is great diversity among us about key questions such as how to understand the relation between evangelism and dialogue, or how to present the Cross and Resurrection to people of other faiths. We believe it is important to identify the range of issues which need to be addressed, to support with adequate resources theological centres around the Communion which can engage with these, and to encourage the sharing of programmes of study through internet and other media. Meeting in Bangalore, we were particularly impressed by the role that a centre of excellence like United Theological College could play in this work.
5. We recognise also that we need always to think carefully how our theological formulations will be heard by our dialogue partners. To Buddhists and others who do not accept the idea of a Creator God, for example, the very concept of 'theo-logy' is problematic. This is but one instance of a more general issue, of how Christian language can or should be adapted to fit the dialogue situation.

E. For the Anglican Communion

1. We have been struck again by the great variety of the multi-religious contexts of Churches around the Anglican Communion, and by the diversity of ways in which Anglican Christians are responding in their inter faith mission and ministry. We believe that there is much that we can learn from one another, and we want to affirm the role of NIFCON as one of the vehicles which can enable such consultations. At the same time, we recognise the growing volume of meetings and discussions on inter faith issues taking place across the Communion. We sense a need to bring together all this energy so that the Communion can benefit from it in a co-ordinated way.
2. Anglicans differ greatly from one another on theological and practical issues relating to people of other faiths, particularly on the hermeneutic with which they approach scripture and tradition, and in their views of the relation between dialogue and evangelism. We believe strongly that more dialogue on these issues is needed within our own Communion. Such intra-Christian dialogue is a necessary complement to inter faith dialogue itself. It would also demonstrate that we are taking seriously within our own internal church life the work of patient listening, seeking understanding, and striving for reconciliation which we are commending to our partners in dialogue. Intra-Anglican discussions on these issues need to be shared as appropriate with our ecumenical Christian partners, particularly those with whom Anglican Churches have official relationships. Our dialogue also needs to draw in those who are often described as 'fundamentalist' Christians.
3. We hope that bishops and other church leaders will be able to give a priority in their ministry to developing good inter faith relationships. One practical step is to ensure that they have in place friendly, trustful and easily activated networks of relationships with other faith community leaders. In the many places where such relationships exist, they have proved extremely useful in enabling a speedy and concerted response to crises. More generally, we suggest that dioceses in multi-faith areas should take seriously the establishment of dialogue cells to draw in people of different faiths at every level.
4. It is important that church leaders making statements on inter-religious issues should think carefully about the effect that their words may have on their fellow-Christians and on inter faith relations in other parts of the world. We have come to realise how deep an obligation of mutual responsibility we owe to one another in our different engagements in this complex field.

F. NIFCON Related Issues

1. This, the first consultation held by NIFCON in the ten years of its life, has been an important step in the development of our Network. Many important things have emerged through the consultation, although inevitably and appropriately there have been learning experiences both in relation to any potential future consultations, and for the ongoing life of NIFCON.
2. Our consultation aimed at having a regional focus, but with international participation. Although this approach was questioned by some of the participants, most felt that it was a good model that could be employed elsewhere. It would be very useful to hold another consultation focused on a different region as soon as feasible: either or both Africa and a Muslim majority area have been mentioned. Another issue of representation raised at our meeting was the comparative lack of women present, though this may perhaps reflect the different kind of involvement women often have in inter faith issues in the life of the Communion. Some comment was also made on the need for greater theological diversity among the participants. Linked to this, it would be good to explore the possibility of a joint conference or consultation organised by NIFCON and IASCOME (the Anglican Communion Mission Commission). It is also important for NIFCON to find ways of relating appropriately to other Anglican Communion Networks, and feeding an inter faith dimension into their work.
3. One particular issue that has surfaced is the nature of the 'Concerns' in the title of NIFCON. It is important to emphasise that these will often include advocacy and mission related issues. It would be unhelpful if NIFCON were to be pigeon-holed as merely dealing with dialogue: ours is a Network which necessarily brings together inter faith relationship analysis, inter faith relationship building, mission, peace and justice issues, and education, alongside inter faith and intra-Christian dialogue.
4. Questions relating to the future role and work of NIFCON have been raised. Should NIFCON seek to be 'mother' to smaller regional networks? Does NIFCON have the resources and expertise to do networking? It is important, to avoid reduplication, that we know what is already going on elsewhere. Equally, given our limited resources and budget, it is important to know to which other inter faith bodies it should relate.
5. The question has emerged of how does or should NIFCON relate to ACC. It is officially a Network, not a Commission; what does and what should this mean? Linked to this is the question: 'Who exactly is NIFCON?' By implication this raises questions about the structure and management of NIFCON, a topic under current discussion. It also raises the issue of funding, as would the holding of any further consultation: to ensure that smaller and less well-resourced churches are adequately represented, we need to ensure that participation does not depend on individual churches' ability to pay.

Conclusion

The question of a particular role for the Anglican Communion in relation to inter faith concerns was a reflection voiced near the beginning of the consultation and, though not discussed in detail, rested with us throughout the meeting. It might be assumed that the area of inter faith concerns is one in which Christians should work together ecumenically as far as possible. So why an Anglican Network? And an Anglican consultation? Part of the answer to this question must surely lie in the real sense of 'Communion' that we felt permeated our meeting, with participants from different parts of the world deeply sharing the joys and pains of one another. Another part of the answer perhaps lies in the statement about the nature of Anglicanism made by Archbishop Michael Ramsey which was quoted at the meeting. 'While the Anglican Church is vindicated by its place in history, with a strikingly balanced witness to the gospel, to the Church and to sound learning, its greater vindication lies in pointing through its own history to something of which it is a fragment. Its credentials are its incompleteness, with the tension and travail in its soul. It is clumsy and untidy; it baffles neatness and logic. For it is sent not to commend itself as the "best type of Christianity", but by its very brokenness to point to the universal Church wherein all have died.'

Although Archbishop Ramsey was there thinking about ecumenical endeavours perhaps Anglicanism's 'incompleteness' and ability to point beyond itself also applies to its vocation to engage in inter faith concerns. It is an appropriate thought with which to conclude this report, conscious that what we have achieved in this, NIFCON's first consultation, is by its nature also inevitably incomplete, although we state our confidence, hope and prayer that we have prepared the ground for the future.
As one delegate put on their evaluation sheet;

'We give thanks for this first Consultation and express gratitude for all who took the initiative. The door is open for other consultations, where strengths of the first can built on, repeated and amended/improved where necessary.'

Amen to that!