

EDUCATION FOR UNDERSTANDING

Challenges and opportunities in inter Faith learning

Church of Ireland Conference

St Thomas' Church, Belfast, 13th October 2012

Presentation by Inderjit Bhogal

Greetings

I greet you all in the Name of God and wish upon you the Peace of God.

It is a pleasure to share some reflections with you.

I want to begin by thanking the Church of Ireland for the “Guidelines for Interfaith Events and Dialogue [2007]. It is an excellent resource.

Month of Festivals: Time to Party

You are meeting in a wonderful October month of festivals:

1st Jewish Sukkoth: the Festival of Harvest and Booths

9th Simchat Torah: the rejoicing at the completion of the reading of the Torah

12th Ayathrem Gahambar: Zoroastrian Festival in honour of plant and vegetable kingdom

16th Navaratra: Hindu Festival dedicated to Durga and marked with fasting and prayer

20th Birth of Bab who is foundational to the Bahai Faith

24th UN Day of prayer for peace: it is also Dashara of the Hindus, celebrating victory of good over evil; and on this day Sikhs will mark the anniversary of the martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur who stood up for the rights of other faiths

25th Day of Atonement in Islam, a central day in Pilgrimage around Mecca

26th Eid-al-Adha: a Muslim celebration that links Islam with Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son

31st All Hallows Eve: originally celebrated as the Celtic New Year and marks the evening of the Christian All Saints Day celebrated in Churches.

What a lot of reasons for a Party!!

On the other hand we cannot but be mindful that we meet at the end of the week which saw the awful shooting of **Malala Yousafzai**, a 14 year old girl in Pakistan, by the Taliban, for speaking up for the right of every girl to a place in school. Malala is fighting for her life and is a global icon of courage and hope. She has fought for the last three years for the right of girls to education. The Taliban call the education of girls an obscenity. It is an obscenity that 60 million children around the world are not going to school today, and 32 million of these are girls.

Corrymeela:

It is a privilege to serve as Leader of Corrymeela and I stand on the shoulders of Giants who have gone before me including Bishop Trevor Williams. Thank you Church of Ireland for all you give to Corrymeela.

The mission of Corrymeela is summarised in six words:

Embracing difference, healing divisions, enabling reconciliation.

Corrymeela can hold up a 50 year track record, but this is yet unfinished business. The Peace Process creates an environment in which the work of reconciliation can be conducted.

The Founder Ray Davey's vision was to build "an open inclusive village". This work remains vital in our world of increasing and complex diversity, especially religious, ethnic and sexual diversity. We do our work in a multi-faith, multi-ethnic, multi-identity society.

A sign at our residential centre in Ballycastle reads:

"Corrymeela begins when you leave"

Much of the work of Corrymeela therefore is conducted in local communities, and Members have helped to establish integrated schools, the hospice movement and the Community Relations Council.

One of the people who has made a considerable contribution to Interfaith work and education in Northern Ireland is Norman Richardson, and Corrymeela takes great delight in

him. Thank you and well done Norman. He is absolutely the right person to be speaking at this conference. Norman's publications in interfaith education and work are a valuable resource to you.

I want to hold up before you two particular pieces of work of Corrymeela and offer them to you as resources in Education for Understanding:

- Corrymeela Schools Programme: For 40 years Corrymeela has been delivering quality Schools programmes that understand the identity, uniqueness and personal value of each scholar. These are offered in Residential and Schools based settings. Our Forgiveness Education for primary schools complements and works closely with the Northern Ireland PDMU Curriculum. We work with Teachers to deliver forgiveness education and offer resources and support.
- Facing our History, Shaping our Future: This programme is supporting educators and young people to link lessons from the past to the moral choices we make today. Through exploration of the Holocaust, for example, pupils learn to combat prejudice with compassion, indifference with participation, and myth with knowledge.
- Get in touch via website, and I am leaving leaflets for your information.
- Become a Friend of Corrymeela, support us and use us as a resource
- When you are looking for a venue for your residential or retreat, use our Ballycastle Centre with it's stunning location.

And remember, one interpretation of Corrymeela is that it is the place where people embrace difference.

My story

My roots are in Sikhism. I was born into a deeply religious Sikh family. I was brought up in an area of Nairobi, Kenya where people of such various backgrounds as Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam, and people of African traditional religions lived side by side. Members of my family have such depths of the awareness of God and relationship with God, and such a depth of spirituality, that in Kenya our house was never far away from the Gurdwara [temple], and we

never moved more than a quarter of a mile away from the Gurdwara. Members of my own family shared in the leading of worship. My grandfather shared in the reading of Scriptures in worship, and so did my mother. I spent hours in the Gurdwara for worship, worship that is centred on the word of God, and where the mixture of reading of scriptures and the smell of incense combines in such a way that when you are there the very atmosphere is like the breath of God. Every visit to a Gurdwara includes being served food in Langar. Guru Amar Das gave the formula: PAHILE PANGAT PHIR SANGAT, "First we eat, then we meet". With eating, of course, goes serving. It is a joy to be a host, and to offer SEVA [service], to serve the food, to wash up. The Gurdwara compound was my playground as a young boy. I attended the Sikh Boys & Girls School where I learned Panjabi and studied the Sikh scriptures. In this Sikh context, my own experience of God developed into a deep relationship of love and of trust. Within Sikhism I understood God as Father and Mother, friend and companion. To quote an often repeated verse: "You are my Mother, you are my Father."

When Kenya became an independent country [1963/1964], my parents chose to bring the family to UK and I started attending a local Church in Dudley, West Midlands.

What I find compelling in Jesus Christ

I began to read the New Testament and encountered Jesus Christ and his teachings. I was captivated by Jesus' compassion for the poor in particular. I was impressed by his respect for different faiths, an aspect of Jesus' ministry that is inadequately articulated in Churches. He pointed to the compassion with which a Samaritan treated someone in need and urged others to "do likewise"; he pointed to a Roman leader, and to a Canaanite Woman and commented on their "great faith". Perhaps Jesus' most radical and subversive and challenging activity, for which he was ridiculed, was to eat with the poorest, and to include the excluded in his company. He kept an Open Table, a Table for all.

What I find compelling in Jesus is this:

- Jesus expresses God who is with us all

- Jesus gives priority to people who are poor, and gives respect to people of Other Faiths
- Jesus eats with those people that others exclude
- Jesus dies abandoned by friends
- Jesus' living and loving has inspired countless billions of people.

Jesus Christ pointed to the inclusiveness of the Kingdom of God. He broke barriers and included those that others excluded, socially and spiritually. He welcomed the poor, "the unclean" and "the sinners" and ate with them. He respected people of other faiths, cultures and nations. This is a part of his story that is not always articulated. He turned over the tables which exploited people financially and spiritually, and which excluded people to such an extent that even their prayers were not valued. "My house," he declared in God's name, "shall be called a house of prayer for all nations"

[Mark 11:17]. And, because of this, he risked his life, and was executed.

The one who stands by those that others reject is rejected; the one who befriends the poor is denied by his best friends; the one who respects others is mocked and ridiculed by opponents; the one who desires life abundant for others is denied life and dies a cruel death; the one who speaks truth and seeks justice is executed as a blasphemer and criminal. The one in whom we see God who is with us cries out: "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" [Mark 15:34]

This is the point at which Jesus' story touched me. This is the unique feature about Jesus for me in a world of many faiths and many messengers of God. Jesus identifies with those who are excluded and suffer, to the point of being broken and death. In this Jesus shows God's way, God's truth and God's life. Jesus illustrates a holiness of connectedness not separateness, of intimacy not aloofness. His example and teachings disclose clues and ways to live and to interpret life.

Indian Dalit theology describes Jesus as the one who identifies with the Dalits, the self designation by people who suffer through exclusion by society. The term Dalit comes from "Dal" which means crushed, broken. It is the name given to broken, split red lentils, for example. It is one of the cheapest forms of food and feeds the poorest. Jesus is Dalit. Jesus connects through food, and shows us how to engage with the most marginalised people. Jesus did not feel he was polluted, made impure, in any way through contact with people considered by others to be "the lowliest, lowest and the least" [Rabindranath Tagore].

The genius of Jesus was to put food, a meal, at the centre of his community. He said “whenever you meet in my name, have a meal and remember me” [Luke22:19].

So often Churches present Jesus as a dull man and make following Jesus a tedious and serious business. Food should be at the heart worship and life. The Holy Communion should sum up what Churches represent. It should be placed in the context of the many meals Jesus shared with others, especially the poorest. The Holy Communion should nurture in us lifestyles that will end hunger, greed and inequality, the biggest scandals of the world’s community.

We can learn from Jesus’ style that eating with each other is mutually enriching and a blessing. I will later give you the Model of Jesus the Gate and Good Shepherd to reflect on.

Understand, respect, accept

I lived in Sheffield for 24 years before I came to Belfast last year. Practically every day I saw writ large on the wall of Sheffield Hallam University the words of Poet Andrew Motion:
WHAT IF?

Pause now, and let

the sight of this sheer cliff

become a priming place

which lifts you off

to speculate

What if...?

What if...?

What if...?

What if we could make a difference? What are the three things you could contribute?

For me, It is more urgent and important, than ever before, to do all we can to:

- Work at creating better understanding of and with each other
- Develop greater respect and trust of and with each other
- Come to a point where we really accept each other as human beings.

This is an ongoing never ending process we have to commit ourselves to and bring others to.

What if...?

The most significant contribution we can make now is to help people to live confidently with religious diversity, and to dispel fear of differences, the fear of the “other”.

In Government language, we have a duty to promote community cohesion, which is defined as “working towards a society in which there is a sense of belonging by all communities; a society in which the diversity of people’s backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and valued; a society in which similar life opportunities are available to all.”

The obstacles to this goal includes the lack of meaningful interaction between different groups, mistrust and misrepresentation between different groups and religious illiteracy, including, the lack of knowledge and understanding about our own faith, and other peoples’ faiths.

There are three challenges I would like to leave with you.

Ideological Enclosures:

First, the important need help people moved out of their own, often closed worlds, ideological enclosures, and to find pasture in other fields too.

Cognitive Dissonance:

Second, to recognise that the Holy Spirit is constantly cajoling, challenging us in order to lead us into new understandings of Truth.

Enlarged Imagination:

Third, we can grow as Disciples through our openness to Other Faiths.

The Gate

And I want to offer you a Model for Education arising from the ministry of Jesus, based on words attributed to him in the Gospel according to John:

“I am the gate...[by me]... you come in and go out and find pasture...and have life..abundantly” [John 10:7,9,10].

I want to use three stories and reflect on emerging insights;

First a story from Springfield Road, Belfast.

I was on the Springfield Road,Belfast.

It was a cool calm evening.

There was little traffic.

I stood by the “Peace Line”,

Just here a brick wall, lined with young trees

To soften the tone, and sight, and impact.

A woman came out of her house,

To the front gate.

Her house was right on the “Peace Line”.

The front of the house is in the “Catholic” area.

The back of the house is in the “Protestant” area.

I stopped to chat with her.

A brightly dressed woman,

When she realised I was a visitor,

“You’re very welcome”.

We talked.

“What is it like, living on the Peace Line?”

“It’s alright. It can be tense sometimes.

Occasionally, when stones are thrown, my windows are broken.”

“During the marching season,

The roads are blocked and the gates in the wall are shut,

When that happens my house is used as the Gate.”

“How is that?” I asked.

“People knock, and ask to go through my house

Between the sides.”

"Do you allow this?"

"Yes," she said.

"How do you feel about this use of your house?"

It's OK. I know most of those who come through.

I feel a bit uncomfortable when I don't know someone,

But I never refuse access to anyone."

Our conversation was interrupted when another

Passer-by stopped to chat.

He was a neighbour.

I went away reflecting on the words of Jesus.

"I am the Gate. By me you shall go in and out."

Second a story from an Interfaith meeting between Christians and Muslims in Sheffield.

A group of us, Christians and Muslims, were engaged in dialogue on our respective understandings of God. At one point a Muslim brother asked the Christians the question "Who forgives sins?" There was a mixture of answers from the ecumenical Christian gathering. I was Chairing the conversation and was asked to give a view. I said something along the lines that at Holy Communion Christians use a prayer which refers to God "whose nature it is always to have mercy" recognising that ultimately God forgives. The Muslim group straight away interjected, "then why did Jesus have to die?" This question certainly required the Christians to talk to each other. It created a most thought provoking and stimulating discussion. It also made the Christians to reflect more deeply on a theme they felt was quite familiar and straight forward. I continue to reflect on the issues raised.

Third a story of my meeting with the Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Lady Margaret Thatcher

I found myself one day [November 2000] in an environment where around 100 people in positions of leadership were meeting together. I had been warned that everyone tries to catch a couple of minutes with key people and that I should talk to each person with just one

question, and be ready to be interrupted within a minute or so. I had chatted with a good half a dozen or so personalities when I raised my head and saw the Rev Ian Paisley standing alone. I thought, I have a question for Mr Paisley, walked over to him and introduced myself. I then raised my question. "Mr Paisley, what have you done towards peace in Northern Ireland?" Mr Paisley explained that his votes reflected that he was a popular local politician "But what are you doing to make peace in Northern Ireland?" I asked again. The Rev William Mahood, Moderator of the United Reformed Assembly, came up and introduced himself to Mr Paisley after which I said, "Bill, Mr Paisley was just telling me about his contribution to peace making in Northern Ireland. What would you say Mr Paisley?" The reply came, "What does the New Testament say?" I then quizzed, "What would you say is the message of the New Testament?" Just as he was saying "Love thy neighbour" [and I wanted to ask what that means] I heard a voice from my right..."Ian..Ian.." It was Lady Margaret Thatcher. "This is Inderjit Bhogal, a Methodist Minister" Mr Paisley introduced me to Mrs Thatcher. "I'm a Methodist...five Hymns, five Hymns..." exclaimed Mrs Thatcher, and then someone else interrupted the conversation, and I moved on.

Five Hymns!

There's more to Methodists than that, and of course Mrs Thatcher knows.

I tell this story simply to say it is very easy to stereotype a religious faith or tradition. But five is a good number and I'll come back to it. It's a sacred number in the Sikh faith which has its home in Panjab. *Panj* means five, *ab* means rivers. Panjab is the land of five rivers.

The Gate and the Good Shepherd

What can we do to help people of different backgrounds meet each other, grow in mutual understanding and mutual respect?

How can we help people to reflect on their faith in dialogue with people of other faiths?

What can we do to increase knowledge and understanding of our own faith and that of other faiths?

Perhaps the Model of Jesus the good Shepherd and the Gate offers us clues. We all have

our philosophies of education. Mine is based on this image of the Shepherd who takes the Flock in and out of Pastures. Sheep cannot stay in one Pasture alone. If they do they will not grow well. They have to be led to feed from other pastures too in order to grow well.

The movement is worth noting. It's **in** and **out**, in that order, and it leads to **life abundant**.

So much of Church thought is about going out, out, out. Mission is outward facing. We have work to do within the faith. Mission has inward challenges too.

In Interfaith work, at least, the first movement has to be inward with a commitment to help people to have confidence in their own faith and tradition. With this, they can then move into other worlds with more confidence, and with less fear, and grow in life. This movement then is an endless educational and pastoral task. A Good Shepherd, a good Pastor, a good Teacher, a good Interfaith Advisor, will be like a good Shepherd, constantly helping and accompanying people in their flock, in their charge to move in and out of pastures and to find life, the fullness of life.

A Good Shepherd can help people [scholars] to:

- Move in and out of enclosures and comfort zones [ideological, geographical, environmental, ecclesial, religious]. To grow deeply in one's own tradition, and to go into other areas, environments, faiths in order to grow as person and have a richer life. Kahlil Gibran writes, "your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding" [The Prophet]
- Equip them to become open to new insights and to be enriched through dialogue. Our understanding of all that God gives in Christ will deepen, not diminish or be diluted, through engagement with people of Other Faiths too. Sit with people of Muslim/Jewish/Hindu/Sikh Faith and ask about their experience and understanding of God. Reflect on the words "No one comes to the father but by me" [John 14:6] in dialogue with people of Other Faiths.
- Grow i understanding of Other Faiths. Yes there's the Methodist Five Hymns. Muslims pray 5 times. Sikhs have their 5 Ks. How about helping people to learn at

least five things about five major World Faiths [Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism] . Here are five themes to explore:

1. God is One, but there are different understandings of God
2. Each faith holds up key Messengers of God
3. Each faith has a focus on prayer [and fasting and festivals]
4. Each faith has traditions of pilgrimage
5. Each faith holds up the Golden Rule: Only treat others as you want them to treat you

These are all great themes to explore and develop.

Faith

Faith is a live issue today.

Hardly a day goes by without Faith being a news item. Religious Faith is a hot topic of discussion in UK. Religious and Secular writers are engaged in the debate. Believe it or not, but sales of books that explore religion or spirituality have grown in recent years. Richard Dawkins anti-faith polemic, “The God Delusion” is a popular book and so is theologian Alistair McGrath’s book “The Dawkins Delusion”!

Secular rhetoric is claiming that “religion kills” and regards, for example, 9/11, 7/7, the Iraq conflict and the Israel/Palestine conflict as clear evidence.

Christians are having to come to terms with being a minority presence in many contexts in UK. Churches that monopolised or evacuated the urban scene and thought ecumenism meant forming links across Christian denominations are challenged to meet neighbours of other faiths, build good relationships with them, to engage in dialogue, and to work together for the welfare of all.

Schools, Colleges, Universities, the Police, the Social and other Services, and work places are all challenged to consider the implications of Religious plurality.

Knowledge of different religion grows, not only through books, but through meeting neighbours of different faiths. Such meetings also help us to see that goodness and grace is not just the fruit of one religion, but of all religions.

All this has challenged the idea that only one religion is valid or able to mediate truth and

salvation, and goodness and holiness. Greater awareness of different religions, and closer relationships among people of different faiths, has shown that God is experienced, adored and responded to throughout the world. Different religious are different traditions of response to one God.

In all this work we have many local resources to assist us.

We have, for example, bodies such as the Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum and the Dublin City Interfaith Forum as resources.

Pluralism is essential to our wellbeing.

Faith communities have a vision to serve and to keep hope alive. We are committed to God and also to people. We are rooted in local neighbourhoods as well as in worship and prayer, and have a strong desire to make life better for all. We address inequality and are well placed to relate to the most marginalised sections of our communities.

Faith communities provide

- Values of hope, justice and hospitality
- Resources in terms of people and property
- Projects that make a difference and transform communities
- Experience, expertise and knowledge all from grass roots level and so often in areas of deprivation.

Faith diversity is part of our richness and requires from us all greater understanding, mutual respect and acceptance of each other.

While many welcome this and respond positively, others feel threatened as can be seen from the rise of Far Right political extremists. Prejudice and discrimination is increasingly about religion and religious identity as well as about race and racial identity. Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia and religious hate is alarmingly high. We all have to do all we can to challenge political as well as religious extremism, and also prejudice and racism.

Understanding, Respecting, Accepting

So what are the practical steps we can take in schools as we respond to the challenges presented by our multifaith society?

1. Worship Centres of all faiths are a huge resource available to schools and other organisations, they are learning centres and provide an important focus for better understanding of faiths and also for meaningful interaction between different communities. We can become better learning communities ourselves, and provide resources that help members to be at ease with religious diversity.
2. All Worship and Theological Centres, of all faiths, as well as Schools, Colleges and Universities have significant roles to play to promote better understanding, greater respect and mutual acceptance in communities. Their work would be strengthened if they were to form networks and partnerships and work together. Worship and Theological Centres should be centres of excellence that promote good faith and spiritual formation that gives life to people and communities, and they should challenge extremist faith and formation which is destructive of individuals and communities.
3. We can strengthen efforts for education to be inclusive, reflecting who we are in multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-faith 21st Century Britain.
4. Schools are at the heart of local communities, and influence each household with children. Schools help to promote shared values of openness, freedom of expression that includes learning to listen with respect to other views and learn from them. Schools are not required to nurture young people in their faith, but to educate them about different faiths, and to learn and live by the core value of all faiths which is to only treat others as we would want them to treat us, and that is with respect, courtesy and

compassion.

5. In this task Schools have resources in the local communities, and these include Faith Leaders [lay and ordained], and members of local Interfaith Groups. The best way to gain access to them is to go out and actually meet these remarkable people, and form your respectful relationships with them. There really is no short-cut to establishing relationships. Of course, care has to be taken that those invited to work with children from local communities pass all the appropriate requirements.
6. From time to time it would be perfectly appropriate for schools to host interfaith meetings for relevant conversation on issues that are giving you concern or the celebration of festivals, for example. These meetings would ensure regular contact and strengthen relationships.
7. One thing I would not like to hear again is the view that we cannot celebrate Christmas or some other festival because we may offend some people by celebrating it. It's the annual news item at Christmas particularly. It's usually about a School deciding not to celebrate Christmas, or not to sing Carols, or not to serve Turkey, because it may cause offense to others. In the 40 years I've lived in UK I've personally never come across anyone of any faith who is offended by Christmas, or by any other religious festival. We should be concerned, and take care in order that we do not cause offense. But you do not cause offense by celebrating Christmas or your festival. You can cause offense by not giving due respect to other peoples festival also. So celebrate Christmas and celebrate the festivals of other faiths also. The Yorkshire and Humber Faiths Forum produced "Let's Celebrate" a pocket sized guide to Festivals and Faiths. The intention of the Guide is to give easily accessible information about 9 world faiths and their major festivals.

8. I would strongly recommend that the Staff and Governing Bodies and Councils of each School, College and Universities are thoroughly inclusive and representative of the population of our multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-faith Cities. We need more Teachers from minority ethnic communities.

9. Teenagers and young people may not observe religious faith or engage in worship, but they have profound spiritualities and spiritual needs. A survey carried out recently showed that over half of all students thought “values, beliefs and faiths” important in their lives. What is true of students is true of staff also. This is where Chaplaincy has a part to play, quite apart from their role in engaging in discussions around values in Education.

10. One of the areas of tension in communities is around the presence of those seeking sanctuary [Asylum Seekers] and Refugees living among us. Much of the tension and hostility towards “Asylum Seekers” particularly is based on myths around numbers and benefits involved. Many Asylum Seekers in Britain and Ireland suffer destitution because of the inadequate levels of support available to them, and also because they are not allowed to work. Children of “Asylum Seekers”, migrant workers, unaccompanied “asylum seeker” children and trafficked children are some of the most vulnerable children living among us. The City of Sanctuary initiative is about encouraging all organisations to help to create a cultures of welcome and hospitality.

This is the very significant role education can play in preventing extremism, religious and political, and promoting respectful community relationships.

In closing I want to commend to you the document Understanding Faiths, a resource we created in Yorkshire and Humber. I hope we will produce a similar document applicable to

the North and the South:

- It will help you identify issues, how faith traditions may impact on public as well as private life, and provisions made by relevant legislation against discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief
- The material provides information on engaging with faith communities, to ensure faith communities are formally represented and consulted
- It provides a helpful guide on organising events in inclusive ways
- It lists useful organisations and their contact details for the areas we work in.

Let each one of us play our part. We can all do something to make life better and abundant for us all.

Thank you and God bless you in your efforts to promote better understanding, mutual respect, and acceptance of each other as human beings. Multifaith community works. Let us work to make it happen.

Inderjit Bhogal

Leader

Corrymeela Community

13th October 2012 [5000 words]