

GENERAL SYNOD 2013

REPORT OF THE COMMISSION FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY AND DIALOGUE

Seconded by the Revd Darren McCallig (Diocese of Dublin)

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Archbishop, members of General Synod, in seconding the report of the Commission for Christian Unity and Dialogue I would like to focus my brief comments on the work of the Commission's Inter Faith Working Group of which I am secretary.

As you will see from the report on page 330 of the Book of Reports it has been another busy year for our Group as we have sought to support and resource the Church's engagement with people of other faiths. We held two seminars – one in Belfast in October and one in Galway in March. And we are currently planning another seminar for this autumn – that event will be held in Limerick and will look at issues around gender and inter faith dialogue.

Now, rather than give you a blow by blow account of our activities during the year I'd like to focus for a minute or two on one particular contribution which was made at our Belfast seminar in October. The theme of that event was "Educating for Understanding" and we were delighted to have as one of our speakers that day the Revd Dr. Inderjit Bhogal. Inderjit is a former President of the British Methodist Conference and is now the leader of the Corrymeela Community here in Ireland.

But more than anything else, Inderjit is a man of faith. And his faith has been nourished by two sources (in the main) – the Sikhism of his childhood in Nariobi, Kenya and the Christianity which he encountered when his family moved to England in the 1960s. And at the Belfast seminar Inderjit spoke very personally and very movingly about both of those aspects of his life.

He described how his family in Kenya were people of such religious devotion that when they moved house (as they often did) they always made sure that they were never more than a quarter of a mile away from the nearest Gurdwara (or Sikh Temple). He described how as a child he would sit for hours in the Gurdwara as his grandfather or his mother read from the Sikh scriptures. “The very atmosphere,” he said was “like the breath of God.”

And then Inderjit spoke just as movingly and just as powerfully about his discovery of Christianity. For him, he said, the most compelling thing about Jesus is that he reveals a God who is with us and for us. Jesus, said Inderjit, reveals a God who identifies with those who are excluded and suffering. Jesus illustrates a holiness of connectedness, of intimacy not aloofness. Jesus reveals a God who is with us and for us all.

It was a very powerful address and I commend it to you – it’s available on the Church of Ireland website. The reason I highlight it today is that it seems to me to be a very good model for inter faith dialogue. Inderjit’s story, Inderjit’s address shows how it is possible to hold together a passionate and lively commitment to one’s own faith with a profound respect and a deep reverence for all that is good and true and holy in the faith of others. The two are not mutually exclusive – rather they are mutually enriching.

I’d like to finish with a short quotation from the sixth century monk Dorotheus of Gaza. In his writings Dorotheus uses a beautiful image which I think applies to all of our dialogues – whether those be ecumenical dialogues, or inter faith dialogues or indeed our own internal Church of Ireland dialogues. This is what he says:

“Imagine that the world is a circle, that God is the centre, and that the radii are the different ways human beings live. When those who wish to come closer to God walk towards the centre of the circle, they come closer to one another at the same time as to God. The closer they come to God, the closer

they come to one another. And the closer they come to one another, the closer they come to God.”

(Instructions VI.)