

Living Our Faith in a Multicultural Society: Developing Intercultural Dialogue as a Lifestyle

13–19 November 2008,
Castleton, Peak District, UK



Thirty students from 24 countries across Europe and around the world gathered in the beautiful countryside of Derbyshire to reflect on faith, identity and nationality, and to envision ways to build bridges of understanding in our multicultural societies. The week offered valuable input, stimulating discussion, spiritual nourishment, creative release and even some light-hearted diversion in the form of table tennis or football ...

The programme began on Thursday evening with dinner, opening worship and introductions and icebreakers. Things really got underway on Friday morning with an introduction to the week's topic, beginning with a continuum exercise where participants demonstrated their agreement (or lack of it) with various statements such as "Eastern Europeans are not trying hard enough to catch up with Western Europe." This was followed by a mapping exercise, where participants shared the intercultural situation in their own countries; finally, everyone was encouraged to write their initial thoughts and questions on six sheets of paper labelled "living", "faith", "identity", etc.

This introductory session was followed by the lecture "Challenges and Opportunities in a Multi-Faith Context" by the Rev. Arlington Trotman of the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe. After lunch, Trond Botnen of the Norwegian Peace Association conducted a training on conflict resolution and reconciliation, where we explored different conceptions of truth, justice, peace and mercy.

Next came an introduction to the "home groups", where participants were to role-play a scenario about being stranded in London Heathrow airport. This continued each day throughout the week, with the scenario evolving to include the formation of communities, conflict within the community, interaction with other "cultures", and finally re-integration into the outside world.

After home groups came dinner, worship and the intercultural evening, where participants shared food and drinks from their countries, along with interesting bits of culture – we learned what the true definition of Central Europe is, what kind of jokes Scandinavians tell about each other, and what Greek liquor is best for flirting. ☺

On Saturday, the day began with a panel discussion on Eucharistic sharing, with representatives of the Czech Hussite, Lutheran, Orthodox, Anglican and Roman Catholic churches. The members shared valuable insights not only about official church doctrine, but also about their concrete experiences in inter-denominational contexts.

Following the panel discussion, there were two sessions of workshops led by participants on topics of their interest related to the theme, ranging from "Interfaith Dialogue in a Partnership" to a case study of the church-media relationship in Poland, with many others besides.

At the end of the afternoon, all the various SCMs and other organisations represented at the conference were presented by the participants at the movement market; we also learned a bit more about WSCF Europe and global, and were introduced to the journal *Mozaik* by the newly elected editor-in-chief.

After dinner we watched the film *This Is England* (Shane Meadows, 2006), which follows the life of a young British boy who gets caught up in the gang scene and nationalist violence. The film sensitively tries to put his actions into the larger context – not only socio-economic, but also political, exploring the links with Margaret Thatcher's Falklands war. After the film we had a short discussion, and then went down to the village to admire the Christmas lights and have a drink at the local pub.

On Sunday, Magdalen Lambkin, a PhD student at the University of Glasgow, led a comparative scripture study, where we examined the sacred writings of various world religions and identified common truths as well as points of difference. Parallel to this, in a creative workshop participants made collages of their personal ideas of other religions and then tried to integrate these collages into a larger whole.

At lunch we shared an agape meal, beginning with a ceremonial hand washing (mirroring Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet) and some songs, and then continuing with some prayers and personal



reflections on the community-building aspect of sharing a meal together.

After lunch and some time to walk in the hills, the programme continued with a panel discussion on tolerance and appreciation in interfaith dialogue. For this panel we were joined by Jewish, Muslim and Sikh friends, and we learned a lot about what these religions actually believe, clearing up some misconceptions or simple lack of knowledge.

Finally, Elina Eloranta from the Council of European Churches gave a lecture on the Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue. This gave us a better idea of how intercultural dialogue is being pursued not only at the grassroots level, but also at higher and national levels, and where we fit into the picture; we also learned where to find resources and best practices to support our own efforts.

On Monday we had the long-awaited excursion to Manchester, where we started by visiting a Sikh *gurdwara* (temple). We learned about the various ceremonies and musical instruments of the Sikhs, and then we were graciously invited to join in a traditional after-worship meal prepared by members of the Sikh community.

Next we split into four groups to visit various ethnic neighbourhoods around Manchester, where we took note of any differences we could spot and purchased a symbolic item to share with the group at dinner. Each group also met a local vicar for tea, where we learned more about the particular characteristics and struggles of each neighbourhood.

After a bit of free time to explore the city, we reunited at the Universities Chaplaincy centre at St. Peter's House, where we had an excellent meal prepared by the local SCMerS and shared stories of our afternoons. The evening was capped by a rousing session of Celtic dancing, led by a local band.



Tuesday, the final day of the conference, began with the lecture "In the Blink of an Eye: Faith, Pluralism, Communications and the Changing World" by Simon Barrow of the Ekklesia Christian think tank. He outlined some of the challenges facing Christianity today, and identified ways the Church can be relevant in a post-Christian society.

Nagypál Szabolcs of the Békes Gellert Ecumenical Institute in Pannonhalma, Hungary, then led a guided discussion on interreligious dialogue and Christian theology. We discussed the meaning of several terms important in dialogue and compared and contrasted interreligious and ecumenical dialogue, trying to identify the ultimate goals of each one.

After lunch we split into regional groups to brainstorm about how we could take home what we had learned during the week to use in our local contexts, as well as at the national, regional and global level. This discussion focused on concrete actions that we could realize, such as saying "hello" to everyone we meet. Finally we designed and wrote postcards to ourselves to give us a reminder in three months of what we learned here.

Home groups met for a final session, followed by a presentation to the whole group about how each group's scenario played out during the week. Then, after a final evaluation, we came together in a powerful closing worship prepared by participants. And after that, there was nothing left to do but to relax and enjoy the final party: talks,

photographic memories of the week, dancing and games ... ☺

On Wednesday morning, bright and early, we each went back to our respective countries, hopefully full of new ideas and energy and friendships to build on as we work to transform our societies.

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