

Al Azhar - Outline of Study Exchange Programme

The agreement to engage in dialogue made between al-Azhar al-Sharif and the Anglican Communion, and signed at Lambeth Palace, London, by Archbishop George Carey and His Eminence Sheikh Mohamed Sayed Tantawy Grand Imam of al-Azhar in January 2002, included the following as one of the goals of the process of dialogue.

'To encourage Anglicans to understand Islam and to encourage Muslims to understand the Christian faith.'

When the Joint Committee for dialogue met in Cairo in September 2002, it specifically referred to this goal of the dialogue. The communique states, 'The Commission also encouraged the exchange of visits among religious leaders.'

At the meeting of the Joint Committee in Cairo in September 2004 this goal was further developed. The communique included the following statement. 'It is important that religious leaders in our respective faiths have an informed understanding of the religion of 'the other'. With this in mind we were glad to hear about the time spent by Shaykh Fawzy el-Zefzaf at Ridley Hall Theological College, Cambridge. We look forward to developing a series of study exchanges between students at al-Azhar al-Sharif and those in training for the Anglican ministry, as being of significant value for our future relationships.' Members of the Joint Committee also stated: 'We commit ourselves to developing our joint study-exchange programme for students and religious leaders in training.'

In furtherance of this goal there was a ground breaking residential visit in October 2003 by Sheikh Fawzy el Zefzef, accompanied by Bishop Mouneer Anis, to Ridley Hall Theological College, Cambridge, England. There was a reciprocal visit made to al-Azhar in January 2005 by Revd Colin Chapman, during which important steps were made to facilitate the setting up of this study exchange agreement.

Aims of the exchange visits

1. To promote friendship and mutual understanding between Muslims and Christians who are engaged in theological study and/or religious work and who are, or have the potential to become, leaders in their respective religious communities.
2. To enable representatives of al-Azhar to observe how Christianity and Islam are taught in a Christian theological college and how priests/ministers are trained for their ministry, and how Islam is taught in a British university; and to enable Anglicans to observe how Islam and Christianity are taught at al-Azhar.
3. To encourage the participants to share their experiences with colleagues and others in their own country on their return, in order to build bridges for future exchanges, cooperation and dialogue between al-Azhar and the Anglican Communion.

Process

It is intended to activate and develop this study exchange process during 2005-2006 by the following means.

1. A group of Muslim scholars will undergo English language training in Cairo in order to prepare for a study visit to Cambridge.
2. One or two students in training for the Anglican ministry will spend a period of 4-6 weeks on an exchange visit at Al Azhar during spring 2006.
3. Two of the Egyptian scholars who undertook English language training during the academic year 2005-2006 will spend 4-6 weeks at an Anglican theological college in Cambridge in autumn 2006.
4. There will be an ongoing process of evaluation of this project.

The developments during 2005-2006 are intended as a pilot. On the basis of evaluation, it is hoped to develop this study exchange further in the future.

The study exchange will be administered on behalf of the Anglican Communion by NIFCON, (the Anglican Communion Network for Inter Faith Concerns). It will be financially supported by the United Kingdom Foreign Office, who are entering into a contract with NIFCON. On the assumption that the project continues, additional sources of funding may be sought in the future, from Muslim and Christian sources, to build up and extend this study exchange process.