

# FAMILIES AT THE FRONTIERS OF FAITHS



One community: different faiths.

Photo: J. C. Tordai/Panos Pictures.

## EDITORIAL

Inter faith issues are difficult. There is no clear road map showing how to hold together conviction and commitment to one's own religious beliefs and openness to the spirituality of others. As the article from South Korea states, in the past some Christian missionaries attacked Buddhist temples and statues. Other Christian traditions have been more ready to build bridges with different faiths, sometimes citing Christ's openness to those who were outside the religious code of His time and following an inclusive rather than an exclusive understanding of the Bible. Such theological problems become practical issues in the case of inter faith marriage and family life, and this newsletter deals with the real problems

of couples and families who try to cross religious divisions. Frequently these divisions are made more difficult to negotiate because they also involve cultural differences. But the newsletter also tells of successes. Some marriages manage to achieve harmony and enable respect and tolerance for different beliefs. Children manage to embrace divergence and cross barriers which are stumbling blocks to adults. Many articles tell of how when young people meet together in small groups in a supportive environment, positive understanding and fellowship emerge across religious divisions: – a peace centre at Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salem, a swimming club in Jerusalem, young people in Leicester UK, youth groups in Sri Lanka. Here, a stimulus to the inter faith co-operation was the tragedy of the tsunami. Differences of

belief for the young people faded in the face of such devastation, with the focus shifting to that of a common humanity. But tragedy and despair can aggravate religious divisions. In the aftermath of events such as September 11th and the Iraq war, distrust between Christian and Muslim can only too easily intensify with religion becoming a spur – or a cover – for more violence. Inter faith issues are too important to ignore. This newsletter, with articles from many parts of the Anglican Communion, shows couples and young people reaching out and crossing inter faith boundaries. As people of different faiths meet and grow together, many – despite the difficulties – find positive benefits and discover through the focus on families and children that they have much in common.

# INTER FAITH MARRIAGE

## SOUTH KOREA



Korean Temple.

Photo: Rachel Parry.

South Korea is a multi religious society (Buddhism (25%), reformed Christianity (20%), Catholic (6%), Confucianism, traditional shamanism, Korean national religions (1%)). It's easy to see the multi-religious phenomenon in families, relatives, neighbours, schools and companies. There are many cases of different beliefs and different religions between parents, couples and children.

Whereas multi religious society is a field of cultural opportunity in which we can understand the inheritance of civilisations, it can cause tension and conflict. The basic reason is that each religion thinks its own belief the absolute or the highest and that other religions are wrong or inferior. Particularly Christianity shows an exclusivity to neighbouring religions. Korean Christianity was mainly influenced by fundamental conservative missionaries from America during the last hundred years. Sometimes, extreme conservative Christians set fire to Buddhist temples and cut the neck off Buddhist statues. Christianity gives difficulties to families. Family members don't talk about neighbouring religions. I interviewed some as follows:

- A medical doctor, Mr. Lee, married a Christian woman. The bride's parents demanded as a condition of

marriage that he had to go to church. Lee accepted this condition, and at first went to church. But afterwards, he often did not go. Religious conflicts deepened between him and his wife and at last they divorced. It is one of the growing number of divorce cases caused by religious conflicts.

- Mr. Moon of a Buddhist family falls in love with Ms. Kim of a Christian family. But Mr. Moon's parents can't accept two religions and Ms. Kim's parents also insist on the young couple not getting married if he doesn't convert to Christianity. Neither set of parents allows the couple to meet. There are many young people with difficulties of marriage because of different religions.
- A Korean national religion, 'Chondogyo' which respects and serves human beings as like a god, effected the independent movement during Japanese colonialism in the beginning of the 20th century. When women who believe in Chondogyo married Christian husbands however, most of them were seriously afflicted, being treated by the husband's

Christian family members as if they were believing in Satan or practising idolatry. Mrs. Lee Sun-Young's grandparents were 'Chondogyo' believers. But she studied in a Christian mission school. Her husband was not interested in her religion for five years of their marriage. At that time they had conflicts, but he is participating in 'Chondogyo' with their children. Mrs. Lee takes part in religious dialogue meetings.

- Mr. Jun grew up in a Buddhist background and married a Buddhist wife. When he got sick with cancer, he worked as a volunteer in an Anglican social welfare centre. He went to an Anglican church and decided to become an Anglican priest, and, through dialogue, persuaded his parents, wife, and sons to convert. They accepted his decision. His wife hesitated to go to church, but now she does. Mr. Jun is now studying at the Sungkonghoe (Anglican) theological seminary.

Korean society is a multi religious society, and even though it has religious conflicts, the religions have a very peaceful co-existence compared with Christian-Muslim relations. From the 1970s to now, religious solidarity has been found in the human rights movement, eco-life movement, migrant workers' issues, food aid to North Korea, peaceful reunification in Korea, and NGO activities. These are good trends in religious dialogue in social activities. However, these do not affect each family yet. There is no counselling centre for resolving religious conflicts of families in Korea.

An historian, Arnold Toynbee, demanded mature dialogue to resolve conflicts between religions and to transform them to co-operative relations, and, one step further, the need to go beyond dialogue towards creative transformation. Religious dialogue has to be 'a frank self-openness.' And it has to get an enthusiasm for the 'righteous way' to free human life from oppression and injustice in families and society while learning the religious and spiritual experiences of neighbouring religions.

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## INDONESIA



Muslim schoolgirls at prayer.

Photo: Anders Gunnartz/Panos Pictures.

Indonesia, with its highest Muslim population in the world, is very pluralistic in terms of race, language, local culture, and religion. This brings a great potential for intermarriages of people of different faiths. This can be seen in the coverage of celebrities' marriages in printed and electronic media, as well as the marriage of ordinary people. From the perspective of traditions of religion, civil law (Marriage Law No 1/1971) and religious law (Islamic Law 1991), inter faith marriage is actually prohibited in Indonesia.

One of the complicated problems among the people of religious groups is how to harmonise the tensions between religious doctrine and the long history of humanity itself – history of social interactions among different people groups. The theological aspect stated explicitly in the Scriptures and reflected in the teaching of religious institutions, has become distanced from the reality of this history, built by people of the religion itself. This tension is experienced not only by people of different faiths who have considered doctrines or teachings of others but also exists among people of the same faiths.

For example, in the normative tradition of Islam, marriage between a Muslim with a non-Muslim is debatable. On one hand, the Quran prohibits any Muslims marrying non-Muslims, especially Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men. On

the other hand, it also allows Muslim men to marry women of the People of the Book (Jews and Christians). While in Christian traditions, there is a prohibition for Christians to marry people from different faiths.

Even though the religious law (Islamic Law) prohibits inter faith marriages, many Muslim women have married non-Muslim men and vice versa. In order for their children to obtain birth certificates, many of them had to convert to the religion of their spouses. For some wealthy couples, they married abroad.

There are two characteristics in inter faith marriages: religious conversions and religious co-existence. Religious conversion means one of the couple embraces the religion of his or her partner before marriage or after marriage. Religious co-existence means both parties hold firm to their respective religions yet still remain married. The consequence of such marriages is theological boundaries are getting thinner. During the Ramadhan (fasting month in Islam), members of the family would be accompanied or helped by a wife, husband, mother or children who are not Muslim. On the other hand, during the Christmas season or other religious festival, other family members would help in the preparation for the celebration. In most cases, the children can choose to follow the faith of either

father or mother, though when they are still small the parents could choose for them. Sometimes, the children are divided according to the faith of the father and the mother. The problem arises when they have to get birth certificates. Although the family members are divided in the area of religion, they can still live together in harmony where there is respect for one another – tolerance and solidarity despite the difference.

From the perspectives of Indonesian Civil Law, The Marriage Law No 1/1974 gives room for couples of different faiths to get married abroad. Article 56 of the Marriage Law states that marriage between Indonesian citizens or between Indonesian citizens and non-Indonesian citizens abroad is valid because it's based on the law of the country. This creates tension when the couples return to Indonesia where the Religious Law is still effective.

Recent development in Marriage Law shows significant progress. The Ministry of Religious Affairs launched in October 2004 a draft amendment to the 1991 body of Islamic Law, a move that several Muslim scholars say could be part of a "revolution" in sharia. However, the draft – which allows inter faith marriages, prohibits polygamy and promotes gender equality – quickly received strong criticism from mainstream Islamic Law experts. The draft was compiled by a team led by Muslim gender expert, Siti Musdah Mulia.

Cleric Husen Muhammad of the Darut Tauhid Islamic boarding school in Cirebon, West Java, welcomed the draft amendment and urged Muslim scholars to make Islamic teachings more friendly to the changing environment. Also, Ulil Abshar Abdalla of the Islamic Liberal Network hailed the draft. "It's very radical not only for Indonesia but also for all Muslim countries, if not the world," he said.

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HONG KONG



Different faith backgrounds: happy family.

Respect for each other's religious beliefs and acceptance of their distinct cultural backgrounds, appear to be the key to the harmonious relationship between Yolanda, a Roman Catholic from the Philippines, and Joseph, a Hong Kong Chinese Buddhist turned Roman Catholic.

This was not the case at the start of their marriage, though, according to Yolanda. "It was a difficult process for us; we were always quarrelling." But being a devoted Roman Catholic, Yolanda struggled to let her husband understand the importance of her faith in building their marriage and ultimately their family.

Joseph and Yolanda met in Hong Kong in 1998 at the time when she was working as foreign domestic helper and looking for a new employer. Joseph, whose marriage was then on the verge of a divorce, was attracted to the young lady, 16 years his junior. He offered to sign an employment contract with her with the intention to extend her visa while arranging his divorce papers.

Yolanda, on the other hand, was taken by the kindness and open-mindedness of Joseph. She explained the reason for her coming to Hong Kong, which is to provide a better life for her family. She made Joseph understand her financial obligations to her loved ones back home. Joseph assured her that he would provide a separate allowance for them.

The Filipino culture of extended families was accepted by Joseph. Yolanda's relatives in Hong Kong were allowed to visit their home. Inviting friends to their

home is not a particular trait of the Chinese unless during traditional holidays like Chinese New Year or other festivals. For the Filipinos, having visitors brings good luck to the home – contrary to the Chinese belief that having visitors brings bad luck (presumably due to financial reasons).

Their union was made official in a civil ceremony and one year after, they were blessed with a daughter, Ashley. "She is the angel who provided strength and stability to our marriage," says Yolanda.

Instilling Christian values and discipline to their daughter was left to Yolanda. Joseph has remained the economic provider to the family. Although he has converted to the Roman Catholic faith, Joseph does not go to church. He has respected Yolanda's religious devotion by having statues inside their home.

Other inter faith marriages in Hong Kong are not as harmonious and successful. One Christian, Filipina, who married a Chinese Buddhist is practically controlled by her husband. She has no social life since she has to stay home to cater to her husband's needs, aside from taking care of their two children. Their home is typically Buddhist, having all the trimmings of the Buddhist culture. However, she is allowed to attend to her own church activities if she wants to. She doesn't go to her husband's traditional Buddhist festivals although their children go with him.

In Hong Kong, priority is focused on economic survival or the ability to make money. For the majority of Filipinos who have managed to survive poverty, their

priority has always been to rely on their faith in order to improve their life and livelihood.

Hence, for an inter faith marriage or family to succeed, constant communication, respect for each other's faith and culture, and commitment are vital.

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NETWORK FOR INTER FAITH CONCERNS (NIFCON)

The Anglican Communion has a number of Networks. The Network for Inter Faith Concerns (NIFCON) has existed since 1994. It aims to collect and disseminate news on inter faith relations throughout the Anglican Communion. In doing this we hope to offer encouragement and share best practice. The "Concerns" part of our name indicates our role as advocates for those who face persecution or discrimination because of their faith. As the only network to have a staff member working from the Anglican Communion Office, we welcome colleagues from other Networks whenever they come to the building. We enjoy working with IAFN as our 'big sister' and are very pleased that the Family Network has chosen to focus in this newsletter on inter faith concerns and the impact they have on families. NIFCON is well aware that there are blank spots on its map where we do not have contacts to send and receive news on inter faith matters which is hard when we want to be as inclusive and representative of the whole communion as possible. If reading this you feel you could correspond with us on inter faith relations in your part of the Communion, or know someone else who might, please be in touch with us.

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SOUTH AFRICA



Nelisiwe Bam.

Photo: Ian Sparks.

It is always easy to gloss over inter faith issues, particularly when we talk in terms of marriage. The reason is that, when two people are in love there does not seem to be anything that can stand in the way. People don't even think or discuss it, yet it is very important to talk about faith in pre-marital counselling. It is even a challenge sometimes when the couple belongs to different denominations, where none is willing to give up their denomination for another. It is even worse with other faiths.

I have a friend, who married a non-Christian; it was fortunate that they discussed it before marriage. The man allows her to go to her church, the children get baptised. He understood (which is rare) that it would not be easy for her. He asked her to respect his faith and its rituals, even though she does not believe in them. She accompanies him to his place of worship even though she does not believe. They agreed to let the children take the decisions about their faith when older. This is a rare case of the two parties understanding each other.

In some cases this becomes such a hopeless issue that even the children become caught up in the battle. Another challenge is that, in our culture, women are always expected to leave their church or faith and go to the man's church or faith. So it is the women who suffer loss all the time without even finding out how much she is attached to her own faith and how active and involved she is. It is always a pity that when a couple is still courting such issues are taken lightly.

I have a problem with Christians, in that we are very easily converted to other faiths. I think we need to build a very strong base in our faith from the beginning so that, like all the other faiths, we firmly build our family life on Christian values. We should not be arguing about whose Church is better than whose. We should concentrate on Christ's values and teachings.

The schools in South Africa have stopped praying in assembly, because there are people of other faiths. The Mothers' Union, have adopted some schools to do prayers with the children in the mornings. Some days which were Christian holidays have been scrapped e.g. Ascension Day. There is even talk to remove Good Friday, Easter Sunday and Christmas. This is because there is no other holiday from any faith which commemorates any of the events. This for me is very scary and homes and churches need to work very hard to cover the gap. My big concern is

find people from other faiths who worship on Saturday attending gatherings or funerals because for them it is a sacred day for worship and nothing else. Christians don't mind whether it is Sunday or any special day; as long as they are invited they will choose whatever instead of church.

My fear is that in the case of Christian faith, we need to battle for it or else it will die a natural death. Let us be vigilant: teach, talk about our wonderful Christ who does great things and convince the youth. We have a faith in our country which allows men to be polygamous; more South African blacks are converting to it, so they can get as many wives as they wish.

For inter faith marriages, we need intense pre-marital counselling because in most cases such marriages do not work. In the Province of Southern Africa, the Mothers' Union is working together with an organisation called Family and Marriage in South Africa (FAMSA) to train trainers in Parenting, Marriage Counselling, Divorce Counselling, Human Resource Development, etc. When this is done by the M.U., we use the Bible to illustrate our teachings. We then shall do these workshops in our churches.

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ENGLAND

In an Indian village, a Christian woman who has died lies unburied. Her community refuses to allow her burial because she was married to a Muslim; the Muslim community refuses because she did not convert. In the end only the secular authorities will provide a hasty burial. In Palestine, a congregation holds a mock funeral service for a young woman who has shamed her family by marrying out of her faith.

Sad conflicts like these reflect a view of faith identity as a matter of loyalty, of belonging as much as personal belief. They may seem remote from the current situation in Britain and other western countries where inter faith relationships are increasingly common, as contact between people of different faiths increases. In a culture which values personal autonomy of men and women –



Neighbours: mosque and church.

both in the expression of belief and identity and in choice of marriage partner – inter faith marriage may be seen as a mark of the success of multicultural integration. A generation ago an inter faith wedding in church would have been difficult to contemplate, nowadays couples can find a welcome; new marriage rules in England will make it easier for ceremonies to incorporate aspects of different traditions.

Secular freedom makes inter faith marriage possible and acceptable; it does not eliminate the crucial issue of religious identity for the couple. They may agree to ‘do both’ or emphasise those aspects of culture and outlook that are shared. But for most there are issues over which they have to negotiate. How should a Christian and Jewish family observe Passover and Easter; a Muslim spouse cope with Christmas? What and how much should children be taught about religion when often what is true religious knowledge is deeply contested? To bring the detachment of a comparative religion course into married life is hard, especially when couples have to find a workable compromise in isolation, without understanding or support from family or faith community. Where one partner has a clearly articulated faith, rules grounded in religion may efface those of the ‘less certain’ partner. In Islam, children of a Muslim father are Muslim, and exposure to a parent’s Christian culture may be unacceptable. Yet even in families where only one faith is practised, if there is a lack of recognition of ‘the other identity’, that partner can end up feeling marginal

and estranged. Conflicts between faith groups on a world stage may also ‘pull the couple apart.’

Inter faith couples benefit from sensitive pastoral care before and after the wedding in learning to identify and address these kinds of issues. Contact with others in similar marriages also helps tackle their isolation, and several recent initiatives aim to provide this. A new website sponsored by Churches Together for Families, an ecumenical forum, at [www.interfaithmarriage.org.uk](http://www.interfaithmarriage.org.uk) shares information, insight, resources and a virtual meeting place for couples and



Multi faith hospitality.

those working with them.

Given the risks of failure and unhappiness, would it be better simply to discourage inter faith marriages? Are the faith-threatening compromises of an ‘unequal yoking’ too severe to contemplate?

The fact is these marriages reflect current reality in which people, ideas and faiths do interact and affect each other. Love often does transcend boundaries, the difficulty involved making the determination to succeed stronger. Many couples report a sense of engaging with reality, and of being spiritually enriched by the interior dialogue between their partner’s faith and their own. They may well explore faith and faiths more searchingly, but many find their own faith ultimately deepened by the encounter.

Christianity is a religion which happens in difficult places, and as a belief which calls to relationship with Christ through our fellow man, it speaks to the experience of inter faith marriage. Could we even see these relationships, where they are successful and tolerant, as a valuable bridge between faith communities?

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SCOTLAND

Inter faith marriage, parenting and raising of families in inter faith communities can cause a clash in our society when East meets West. As much of religious practice is largely a cultural expression, sometimes there can be the uncomfortable experience of two cultures colliding. It does not have to be like this.

Let us start in India before we make our way to Scotland. Not just India in general, but the most "Indian part of India", the southern state of Tamil Nadu. This is the home of Dravidian art and culture, the true home of Indian vegetarianism, where the Aryans never brought their meat-eating influence. It was in this land of amazingly ornate temples with their soaring "gopurams" (towers) that I met a very British gentleman. He lived in an ashram outside Madurai and on first meeting you would say he was a sanyasi. The saffron coloured robes, the long grey hair, the beard and the mark on his forehead. However, close your eyes and listen to him speak and you are transported to the middle of Oxford. The man I am describing is the late Bede Griffiths, Roman Catholic Benedictine Monk who took Indian inculturation seriously. Here, I thought to myself, is the very embodiment of East meeting West – a good experience.

I started with this story, to focus on an individual who was a devout practising Christian yet was able to embrace and absorb himself in another tradition, in this case Hinduism. It is certainly the case that often a "mixed marriage" can cause many problems for the two respective families: from a Christian perspective, a fear of "selling out to Jesus" as they watch their Christian son or daughter, marry a person of another faith. From a theological perspective, in Scotland we have been engaging in an interesting exercise discussing mission from the perspective of the third person of the Trinity. These reflections have been led by CAIRS (Churches Agency for Inter Faith Relations in Scotland) and we have found ourselves in slightly unfamiliar territory. So often our focus is on Christology, yet interestingly when we move away from our debates about the uniqueness of Christ, to discussing the Spirit, remarkably we discover things which unite rather than divide

us. A journey to a Hindu Temple to have dialogue about Spirit and a Hindu will quickly return with the word "Atman" from the root word "an" which means "to breathe" or "to enliven". So this speaks about movement, the wind or the moving Spirit. Immediately, both Christian and Hindu are on familiar terrain.

A few words about the Scottish inter faith scene. Out of approx. five million people in Scotland, 3,294,545 said they were Christian (2001 Census). Percentage wise there is arguably a stronger Christian feel to Scotland than England. The Muslim population is by far and away the largest minority faith, 42,537 Muslims in Scotland compared to 1,524,887 Muslims in England. Areas where Muslims are in the majority in Scotland are few and the only area of any significance is Pollokshields on the south side of Glasgow. In the main, Scotland is still a white and Presbyterian land.

I started with Bede and I would like to end with him. At Shantivanam Ashram at sunrise and sunset, the community is encouraged to make their way to a dry river bed in the grounds to meditate. Not only is this a powerful experience in itself, but it is a great equaliser, as we start with our common humanity encountering the mystery of God. Meditation permits us to do that and in this case a spectacular setting at two poignant times of day. After this shared experience of the Divine, it may then be rather easier to engage in inter faith encounter.

Scotland is an extremely beautiful country, with its new Parliament recently completed in Edinburgh, with the Scottish Executive committed to creating a more inclusive society. We would see ourselves as an ancient nation with a proud history of hospitality. With a spirit of graciousness which Scots pride themselves in, we are engaging in a positive way to create genuinely multi faith communities.

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Christian symbols, Indian context: Shantivanam Ashram, India.

Photo: A. Wingate.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND INTER FAITH

INDIA/UK

Living in two different cultures both in India and in Britain, I was in a minority situation all my life and have experienced many challenges and insights in my journey. Let me start in India: I am from a background of Christian, clergy wife, backward caste, and middle class family from Tamil Nadu. Seeing other religious people as pagan and other caste people as different and considering clergy as having a selfless and demanding role in society, are the background to the understanding in bringing up my family.

Our mother tongue is Tamil – one of the four South Indian regional languages. Hindi – the national language – is optional and giving English education to children is considered a priority. When children are good at English they can try to avoid studying their mother tongue and national language, and their thought pattern and sometimes culture tries to coincide with western ideology. So there is a great challenge for parents to preserve our culture and family values. Sometimes that drives us to burden our children to habitually speaking the mother tongue at least in home and even in the Church.

As they were in a residential school among children of Christian, multi lingual and multi cultural background, our children had much opportunity to learn different Christian ideologies and values. They also studied in a Hindu Management school in South India where many of the children were Hindus, Muslims and from different caste backgrounds. They have learnt how to live with different people harmoniously.

Children are sometimes ignorant of their caste, but when the school asks them to submit their community certificate as they move from High school to Higher secondary school, they gain their caste identity. Many times the conflict in society between different castes challenges them as they grow up. They raise many questions and challenge the parents in accepting people as they are.

Living in Britain as a South Indian and Asian Christian is another minority situation in which we are bringing up our children. Many cultural shocks made us find the way forward without affecting our faith. Sunday is the Sabbath day and that this has to be celebrated with reverence is part of the strong faith we carry. When children are studying in the university they have to pay foreign student fees so they have to work. They have to work in the supermarket and they have to work on Sundays. This is a major conflict for us as to whether we can allow our children to work or not due to our Sabbath celebration. They go to church and after that they work.

Bringing up a family in a minority situation has much to offer. But it is easier and smoother when parents listen to their children’s personal stories and accept their children as they are. This will help the children to grow in a Christian culture of love and to preserve the Christian values in their life journey.

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## JERUSALEM



A schoolboy looks in a tourist shop window selling religious items, Old City, Jerusalem.

Photo: J. C. TordailPanos Photos.

My family and I live in Jerusalem, a city that is central for three main monotheistic religions, and home to people of many cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Our lives and work, our children's studies and play, takes place in a multi-cultural and multi-faith context. I am a Palestinian Arab Christian citizen of Israel. Living as a Palestinian Christian in Israel means that I am a minority twice over, once as an Arab among Israeli Jews, and second as an Arab Christian among Arab Muslims. We are a small community (2% of the population) with a long history in this land. Our schooling was in Arabic and Hebrew. Seventeen years ago I married Kay, a British citizen who had come to Israel as a Christian worker and we now have four boys.

Nearly every aspect of our lives includes different cultures. Our children are British and Israeli citizens. They are Palestinian Arab Christians and attend a local Israeli school in Hebrew. My work is divided between being the academic dean at the Bethlehem Bible College in the Palestinian Authority (which means travelling across checkpoints every day) and at Musalaha, a non-profit organisation that promotes reconciliation initiatives between Israelis and Palestinians. Our close friends and neighbours represent many communities: secular Israelis, international ex-patriots, Messianic Jews, Palestinian Christians and Muslims from Israel and from Palestinian areas.

One of the greatest challenges we have faced is where and how to educate our children – a complex decision that could determine their future and affect their sense of identity and belonging. One option was international schools that used English or French and cater mainly for the foreign community. Another alternative was the Arab, church-run schools

in East Jerusalem. These schools follow the Jordanian system of education and students do not complete the matriculation certificate required for Israeli universities. Another option was the Israeli public school system, taught in Hebrew. However, the chances of facing intolerance and prejudice were high. We have several friends whose children were bullied. In our search we found an experimental school that has a unique philosophy of education, and teaches acceptance of others. In every class there is a number of non-Jewish pupils. The school and the teacher make a special effort to include those students and their background and traditions. For example, at Christmas, my son's class came to our house to learn about Christmas and to celebrate his holiday with him.

The challenges we face educating our children in a setting where they are a minority are probably shared with minorities around the world, although some issues are unique to us being Christians in the Middle Eastern context. For example, what you might think of in the UK as a religious school curriculum, here in Israel is the average secular school. My children attend a school that is considered to be very secular and open-minded towards others. The children learn about all major Jewish holidays according to a standard government curriculum. In general, no other religion's holidays are explained to the students, unless there is a student of another faith in the class. Every year they study the Old Testament, mainly according to Jewish interpretation.

Historical education mainly focuses on the mistreatment of Jews through history, and does not often include other, positive aspects of Jewish/non-Jewish interaction. From a very

early age, schools begin teaching the Holocaust. The methods and age-appropriateness of Holocaust education is a debate among parents and educators. At times, parents complain that the children have nightmares. These are challenges that educators face in the Israeli school system, especially as they attempt to integrate children from non-Jewish backgrounds.

On the Palestinian side, history is taught beginning in the 7th century with the rise of Islam. Very few curriculums include Ancient Near Eastern history or other societies and cultures. History is interpreted from an Islamic point of view. If you are not Jewish or Muslim, you learn very little about your history. Christians are often portrayed as the villain, as regards anti-semitism, the Crusades and the Holocaust. As a result, Christians are put in a defensive position, and perceived by the other students in a negative light. Students do not gain tools to defend themselves, and to learn that the history of Christianity is not only anti-semitism and Crusades. There is also a failure to teach about historical offences against Christians or other groups. There is a burden on Christian parents to impart to their children a bigger picture of history, and to give them the ability to acknowledge the shortcomings of their own heritage, but also the contributions that they gave to the world.

In other areas of life, our children do come together successfully in a multi faith environment. Our boys are members of the YMCA swim team, where there are children from many backgrounds swimming together. There are very good relationships between kids. They are a very supportive and tight group. In order to attain this there has to be a conscious effort from the leadership. The YMCA leaders have communicated to the children and their parents that people leave their religious and national arguments outside and may not bring prejudice into the activities. There have at times been confrontations, especially in the heated conflict that has been going on for the past four years. From time to time expressions are used between the kids, such as 'terrorist' or 'occupier'. In this case, the coaches interfere immediately, deal with these attitudes and reinforce the policy that such sentiments are not allowed. As parents we learnt that when children make a prejudiced remark and it is not dealt with immediately, this is taken as approval for that remark. In that sense, YMCA Jerusalem is seen as an oasis for people to come and be with each other.

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## SRI LANKA



Young Jews and Arabs together, Neve Shalom – Wahat al-Salam.

### Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam (NSWAs)

"My people shall dwell in an oasis of peace" said the Prophet Isaiah

Peace Work at the best of times is hard. Particularly so right now at Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam/Oasis of Peace – a small village in Israel half way between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Here forty families – half Israeli Jews and half Israeli Arab Muslims and Christians – live side by side voluntarily as neighbours. And here despite the relentless cycle of violence and counter-violence, the educational work of the village continues.

The founder of Neve Shalom~Wahat-al-Salam, Father Bruno Hussar (1911-1996) built the House of Silence (Beth Doumia/Bayt Sakina) over thirty years ago. He built it as a place for reflection, meditation and prayer for people of all religions and no religion. Father Bruno would not even describe himself as a religious man but as a man of faith – faith in the possibility that peace between peoples can be achieved. Now there is a new building next to the House of Silence where many peace-building activities take place, including studying texts from the three religious traditions and exploring the narratives surrounding national holidays and memorial days.

A second educational institution is the children's school. Approximately 300 children, mostly coming from the surrounding villages and towns, attend the nursery, kindergarten and primary school. A new junior high school is currently being built and the first and second year students are already in attendance. The children are taught in both Hebrew and Arabic and learn to respect each other for their individual character and not their ethnicity. In this school, violence and hatred seem a long way away.

The reality of the complex political conditions outside the village really hits home when you visit the third educational institution – the School for Peace. This has

trained over 25,000 Israeli Arab and Jewish students, teachers and professionals, in techniques of conflict resolution and co-existence. Its main work is the Youth Encounter Programme. Students in their penultimate year of high school come to the village for a three-day residential course, during which they get to know a bit about each other. They find they have common interests: clothes and music for example; they all wear jeans and often like the same music. They have similar problems at school and at home. But there are also much more difficult issues to face: military service, checkpoints, the holocaust, refugees and settlers.

Recently, I visited the School for Peace and observed a session of the Youth Encounter Programme. Each young person was asked to choose one from the many emotive photographs of violence and terror laid out on the floor. Then each was asked to talk about how they felt about the present conflict when looking at the photograph. Not an easy task for those young Arabs and Jews. But just to see them sitting in a circle in the same room was something special. Many with their heads hanging down – depressed and angry, yes – but still there together sometimes raising their eyes to look at each other, sometimes talking and learning to empathise with each other's problems, to hate a little less and love a little more.

Of course, education isn't a quick fix and it's sometimes difficult to measure its impact. But I believe education is the only way of making a lasting impression. The reality is that this community exists and is growing. There are more families who want to live and send their children to school here. But for this vital peace work to continue support is needed.

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### Aftermath of the Tsunami

The Diocesan Relief and Rehabilitation Desk of the Diocese of Colombo is implementing a programme in which inter faith volunteer youth groups travel to areas affected by the tsunami, and work with those from the area to clean up houses, schools and public places.

As the immediate relief work was being done by different agencies using heavy machinery, we saw the need to send small groups to different areas to initiate cleaning work as the people were in a state of shock. The clean-up teams organised by the Diocese were of 12 to 16 youths. One of the conditions was that no cameras were to be taken as we had to be very sensitive to the image the teams will project. The young people generally started with a moment of silence, as they were inter faith groups. They took with them some basic tools, and when they started the work, local people sometimes joined them with their tools.

### Report of one Inter Faith group.

As soon as we settled in, we decided to get down to work without wasting a moment. A house had been organised for us to clean at Rumassala. The team was extremely efficient and through teamwork we cleaned up the entire dwelling in no more than two hours. Soon afterwards we headed back for lunch, which was followed by a half hour respite.

We then went to another site not far from where we were based. No walls remained to identify this house. Its only visual reference was its foundation, which served like a grim reminder that this slab of concrete had once been the floor of a home. One helper found a picture of a seven-year-old boy in the rubble. The picture had survived its innocent master. Despite the swelling feelings of despair, the team cleared away as duty expected them to do so.

The next day we awoke refreshed in mind, yet our bodies were still recovering from the exertions of the previous day. We had thought that the cleaning of the school was a task more suited for Hercules and not us, yet the team rose to the challenge of two whole buildings, which included six classrooms and an office. We completed in four hours what would have seemed like a two-day project. Teamwork was epitomised. Like our country, we came from different walks of life, different cultures and different faiths, but we were one team working as one.

The next day was to be our last day in Galle. This saddened us as we wished we could have stayed longer to help more. This experience was rewarding not only for the cause that it was done for but also for what it taught us about working together in troubled times. The 16 people who set out on this expedition became a very close-knit unit and we made the most of it with no mishaps. We did our best to give something to those who had lost everything. It was the least we could do.

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ENGLAND



An inter faith picnic. Photo: Diane Johnson.

We all want the best for our children. For many Christian couples, and even those who have only a tenuous connection with the Church, it may mean arranging a baptism to welcome the child into the world and the Christian community. But what happens when one of the parents is a Christian, and one is from another religion, a Jew, perhaps, or a Muslim or a Hindu? While a mixed faith couple may feel they have successfully negotiated their own spiritual space, when children arrive there are new issues to decide – particularly issues of belonging and of faith identity.

There are three main approaches to a child's faith identity. The first is the institutional label – to which faith and worshipping community does he/she belong? In many traditional churches a person becomes a Christian and a member of the Church at baptism. For Jews and Muslims the faith of the child depends on that of the parents. The child of a Jewish mother is considered Jewish, and that of a Muslim father is a Muslim too. And in these three religions there is no sense of dual belonging; you cannot be a Christian AND a Muslim;\* for all their common ground and shared ideas, ultimately the two religions are seen as mutually exclusive.

The second way concerns the children's education and nurture. Many parents feel it important for children to understand and respect the traditions and heritage of both parents, even if they have agreed that the children will be brought up within one religion. So the children of a Jewish-Christian couple may attend church with the Christian parent and celebrate Passover and learn about God's actions in bringing the Israelites out of slavery with their Jewish cousins – something which incidentally enhances their understanding of Christian faith. Families who do not regularly attend public worship may still decide to celebrate both sets of festivals, Diwali and Christmas for example. One mother described it as "like walking a tight-rope sometimes, we need to get a balance, and it's not always easy."

\*It is possible to speak of a Jewish Christian, meaning a person who is Jewish by birth but has converted to Christianity.

The third way is what the children understand themselves to be. Outsiders often worry that children in inter faith families grow up 'confused', although in my experience this is rarely the case. Some children identify more strongly with one faith, particularly if one parent is more religiously observant than the other. "Mummy and me are Catholic and Daddy is Jewish," declared one little girl. But others will happily straddle two faiths: "I'm Hindu AND Christian," claims another, causing her Christian friends to look puzzled.

Whatever the child's official religious identity, what is really important is their sense of being loved and valued. Parents should help their children develop a spiritual awareness, a sense of wonder and delight and meaning. Sometimes faith communities are exclusive, and dismissive of other religions, which makes this important task difficult for inter faith parents. Can our churches help and support parents who are attempting to give their children the best, "feeling our way, step by step" as one mother said? Because loving and accepting those on the edges of the faith isn't a woolly relativism, but surely part of our Christian witness.

**Contact Person: Rosalind Birtwistle, C/o Network Office**

In the summer of 2001, the northern industrial city of Bradford was the scene of some of the worst riots in mainland Britain for a generation. Whatever its complex and contested causes, one thing was clear: it had involved a majority of young British Pakistanis in prolonged and pitched battles with the police within a majority Pakistani residential area of the city.

This conflict clearly indicated that relations within the city of 300,000 between the 80,000 Muslims and the non-Muslims had begun to go badly wrong despite resources injected into inner city areas since an earlier major riot in 1995. The Muslim communities have settled in the city in the last forty or so years, attracted by jobs, especially in the labour-starved textile industry. A majority have origins in rural Kashmir – one of the least developed areas of Pakistan. Down the years separate communities have formed, so that now we have Muslim quarters in the city. Segregation is seen most dramatically in schools which are often all Asian or all white.

The tense international situation since 9/11 and atrocities such as Madrid and Beslan mean that the Muslim communities are exposed as never before to media scrutiny. Distrust is escalating. This was the situation in which a number of Christians and Muslims decided to initiate the Intercultural Leadership School (ICLS) in 2002. Its origins lay in a conference in 2001 on shared citizenship organised by the Archdeacon of Bradford, the Anglican inter faith Adviser and a couple of Muslim friends. The aim of the conference was to explore the extent to which local politics, business, education and urban regeneration were areas in which Christians and Muslims in the city were actively collaborating. The conference was a great success and had involved a leading Christian and Muslim from Berlin, Rotterdam

and Copenhagen. It also attracted Geza Tessenyi, who then had the responsibility in the Council for Europe in Strasbourg for asylum seekers.

Geza had piloted a conference in the former Yugoslavia for young people from different communities after the civil war. He suggested that we try this in Bradford. We did and the ICLS was born. It involved selecting 15 young professionals in their 20s from Muslim, Christian and 'secular' backgrounds. Young people who were active in their respective communities and thus role models for young people – the 14 to 19-year-olds we could not reach directly.

We took these 15 away for a four days residential at Scargill Conference Centre. Each day had a theme: the first was 'religious literacy' whereby we invited a Christian, Muslim and humanist scholar to talk about ethics in their respective traditions and how space was made for outsiders and how differences were negotiated. This gave people a chance to ask all the questions they wanted about another religion or ideology. The second day was devoted to leadership skills with the specialist flown in from Pakistan, an inspirational teacher. The third day was devoted to media skills and the final day was devoted to conflict resolution skills led by a member of staff from Bradford University's Peace Studies Department.

An essential part of the four days was a cultural evening organised by the participants. This has become one of the highlights of the ICLS – where they work together, laugh together and draw from each other's personal and cultural repertoires to entertain and amuse the residents of Scargill: a marvellous team-building exercise.

Over the four days, lasting friendships are made across an ethnic and religious divide. After Scargill there are opportunities to work together in the city through an organisation that the alumni have set up – the Society for Intercultural Leadership (SOIL) resourced by a member of the organising team.

The ICLS runs twice a year and the sixth session took place in early October 2004. One of its many joys is to see fear and suspicion melting during the four days and deep friendships forming. One of our most successful included a young priest, an imam, a policeman and Muslim community activist. We have also drawn on teachers, youth workers, doctors, lawyers and business people.

In a city like Bradford there is no more urgent task than equipping a new leadership with the skills and competences to work across the religious and cultural divide. ICLS is one such contribution which is being multiplied elsewhere. Recently the first ICLS took place in Leicester and the organisers are working on an ICLS for Berlin and Rotterdam... "Great oaks from little acorns grow"...

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INTERNATIONAL



Young participants at GNRC meeting.

**Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC)**

Five things mark out the work of the Global Network as distinctive.

1. It is about action and not just another network about dialogue.
2. It is about the work of faith-based organisations with and for children rather than across all age groups.
3. It is about inter faith approaches and inter faith projects.
4. It is an NGO based in Geneva and Tokyo, initiated and sponsored by the Buddhist (Myochaikai) Arigatou Foundation of Japan (which has already fund-aided certain children's work around the world in very selected cases).

5. It has developed regional forums world-wide and a global strategy.

A timely, exciting and well-planned initiative coming to fruition with a first forum in Tokyo in Millennium year, followed by a second in Geneva in 2004 – attended by some 350 people from around 68 different countries – the GNRC emanates from the faith tradition of the East rather than the West.

As a global network of faith-based organisations promoting the welfare of children, and affirming the link between prayer and practice, the GNRC has brought together and encouraged projects working in an inter faith manner. The GNRC global strategy is in three parts:

1. To operate through six regional

forums around the world and to encourage national inter faith children's work conferences.

2. To establish an Inter Faith council on Ethics Education for Children.
3. To form a project on "The Child in World Religions" sponsored by the Arigatou Foundation with support from UNICEF. This will study religious scriptures and sacred texts of ten major religions in connection with what they say about children and children's rights. The goal of this is to develop a primary resource that informs and guides the work of faith-based organisations for children's rights and well being, and also to examine the commonalities in religious values about children and children's rights in the ten religions and so lead to a greater and more effective delivery of programmes and unified policy statements relating to children's issues.

It cannot be stressed sufficiently that the focus on children and the belief in their intrinsic value is the hallmark of the network. No conference takes place without the presence and participation of young people.

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WOMEN AND INTER FAITH

ENGLAND

In Leicester, the most multi religious city in Britain, there are two long-standing Muslim-Christian Dialogue groups. The first, consists mainly of men, many of whom are clergy. It engages in all kinds of issues both theologically and in terms of society and international affairs. In four years it has never discussed family issues nor shared family news. In contrast, the second group – confined to women of both religions and now nearly three years in existence – shares its joys and sorrows freely, and at its heart is a shared sense of humanity and spirituality.

Frequently, personal concerns are shared and prayers jointly offered. A Muslim woman asked for prayers for her father having a triple bypass operation, another for her baby who was

sick (often babies and young children are present at meetings): a Christian for she was about to attend a selection conference for ordained ministry in the Church of England – not a topic we would imagine Muslims offering prayers for! Family occasions are celebrated, such as the safe delivery of a child or the marriage of a member of the group. This led to the bride bringing photos of her wedding, and others bringing their own wedding photos to share and also the clothes they wore at their weddings. The group has a serious discussion about arranged marriages, with explanations from the Muslim members about their own arranged, facilitated or love marriages, compared with the experience of the Christian women.

Shared meals are held, including those to raise funds for charities such as Save the Children in Afghanistan and a children's hospice in

Leicester. Garden parties have also been held, and all these occasions show how the group has passed beyond being two different religious groups meeting, to a group of human beings, all women or young children, sharing life together. They can be serious and discussion is always difficult to stop. They can also discuss tough topics such as genetic engineering, when a university lecturer challenged the women of both faiths about the nature of life and ethical issues.

The group has begun to go beyond the Leicester boundaries, as some representatives have shared their experiences at a consultation in Brussels and in Barcelona at the World Parliament of Religions. It was natural for them to share a meal together, as the Muslim women attending went with their husbands and children and invited the Christian women, as their friends, to the shared apartment.

## WOMEN AND INTER FAITH



Crossing faith boundaries. Photo: Diane Johnson.

At the heart of the group is spirituality. During the annual Ramadan fast time, Christians are given the opportunity to fast from early morning in solidarity, for an issue of world peace, and then to break the fast with the Muslims. They share scriptures, they pray in the characteristic way of each faith alongside each other and the Muslims say how much they love the singing of the Christian women particularly when they sing "Be still and know that I am God." Their own branch of Islam does not encourage singing and this is an opportunity for Christians to feel they have something special to offer.

There is nothing dramatic here; just a group of women meeting together, enjoying life and sharing difficulties. But what is unusual is that they come from two faiths that are often seen as the major protagonists in a war of civilisations which is increasing fear. The basis of what has given them confidence to meet like this is family life, and what they can offer each other of their deep human commonality. Could they be considered, in Christian terms, a new kind of Eucharistic community, breaking down human barriers in their commitment to God and the richness of life that is offered to us, for which they wish to say "thank you" in all kinds of ways, including the sharing of food?

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## JERUSALEM

On December 30, 2004, the Women's Inter faith Encounter groups from all over the country were invited to a women's retreat in the Beduin Tent in Kfar Shibli. The study theme was "Women's Leadership" from the point of view of Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and the Druze religion and the programme included planning for the future. Sixty Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Druze women gathered together and studied and learned from each other, ate delicious Beduin food together, sat in small

groups and shared their personal experiences.

It was a beautiful day and the bus from Jerusalem, after picking up some of the women on French Hill, drove down towards the Dead Sea bypassing Jericho and through the Jordan Valley, turning off near Bet Shean towards Afula. We soon passed Nai'n, the place mentioned in the Bible where Jesus performed one of his miracles.

**JEWISH:** Dina said how difficult it was for her to choose from among the many women in the Hebrew Bible who took leadership into their own hands. Whether to talk about Sara, Rebecca, Lea, Rachel, or about Deborah who fought the battle in this very place, but no, she decided to share with us the story of two non-Jewish women in the Bible, the story of two Egyptian midwives (Exodus 1:15 - 20). These, fearing God, disobeyed the order of the Pharaoh of Egypt to kill all sons born to Hebrew women, while allowing the daughters to live. They told the angry Pharaoh that the Hebrew women gave birth so quickly they could not be able to get there in time to carry out his decree. "Therefore God dealt well with the midwives and the people multiplied, and waxed very mighty." Dina pointed out how when women, non-Jewish and Jewish women, cooperate and take the lead, disaster can be prevented.

**MUSLIM:** Abir brought three examples of Muslim women who demonstrated leadership. The first one was Khadija bint Khawailid who was the first woman who joined Islam and she was the first wife of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). Hadija was a very famous merchant which was very unusual at that time. She fell in love with the Prophet for his qualities. She was twenty years older and she asked him to marry her! When she died, the Prophet called that year the grief year because he had lost both her and his uncle. Another example was Alkansaa who was a very famous poet who encouraged people to join Islam. Although Alkansaa lost her three children at one time, she never lost hope and kept going in her life and giving. She was not only a great leader among Muslim women but a very respected poet.

**DRUZE:** In the absence of the Druze teacher, there was a spontaneous and interesting rendering on the subject of women's leadership presented by two Druze women from Daliat Hacarmel - Hediya and Anune. They told the story of a Druze woman, Shachwama, living 500 years ago who wanted to study so she dressed and lived like a man. They also spoke about current leadership among Druze women who are going to university and becoming professionals.

**CHRISTIAN:** Carmella spoke about women leaders and empowered women from the Christian perspective. She pointed out that since Christians share the same Hebrew Bible for our sources, we too share the same women leaders as our Jewish counterparts. She built on this and talked of Mary. As a devout Jew, Mary listened to God's voice, discerning His will for

her. Her openness, love for God and courage to endure misunderstanding, led this young woman to take a great risk and change the course of human history. Her strength came from the core of her being.

The meeting then broke up into four small groups for further discussion and the session ended with music and dancing. The women formed a circle and gathered around the beautiful Peace Patchwork Quilt and admired the creation, worked on jointly by women of all faiths under the guidance of several artists.

Before making their way to the buses, there was a lot of hugging and well-wishing and appreciation at the opportunity of sharing experience and insights into women of different faiths.

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### PRAYER

Father of all,

We thank you for the freedom of faith: for inter faith hospitality and understanding, and for families of mixed faith who live in harmony together.

We pray for families denied their religious rights: who face inter faith suspicion or hostility, and where normal faith development cannot easily take place.

We ask that the grace of the Lord Jesus may bring to all families a spirit of love, welcome and respect, and an attitude of inter faith concern for the needs of others.

We ask this in His name.

**Amen**

### THE NEXT FAMILY NETWORK NEWSLETTER

The next IAFN newsletter, to be published in the **Trinity Anglican World**, is to be on the theme of **Women and Poverty**.

**IAFN** International Anglican Family Network

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