

NIFCON REPORT TO ACC 14

This report seeks to draw together and report on the main aspects of the work of NIFCON (the Network for Inter Faith Concerns of the Anglican Communion) since the previous meeting of the ACC held in Nottingham, England, in June 2005. Over the last three-four years Christian-Muslim relations has been a key focus for our work, but we have tried to ensure that this has not been to the exclusion of engagement with other world faiths; we have also sought to reflect on theological and practical issues for Anglicans in relating to people of other faiths. 2005 was also the 40th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's 'Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions', *Nostra Aetate* which is generally felt to have ushered in the modern era in respect of Christian engagement with people of other religions. Reflection on the impact of *Nostra Aetate* and response to the anniversary of its publication was also an underlying theme of our work during this period.

1. Consultation on 'Faith and Citizenship' in Kaduna, Nigeria

This was a significant regional event in the life of NIFCON which took place in Kaduna, Nigeria, at the invitation of Archbishop Josiah of Kaduna. We are extremely grateful to Archbishop Josiah Idowu-Fearon and the clergy of Kaduna Diocese for the helpful and hospitable way we were received. Participants in the consultation came from: Canada, Egypt, Germany, Ghana, Ireland, Jordan, Kenya, Liberia, Pakistan, Sudan, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Zambia, as well as a strong representation from the states comprising the Province of Kaduna and from other parts of Nigeria. We were grateful for the participation both of Canon Guy Wilkinson, the Archbishop of Canterbury's Secretary for Inter Faith Affairs, and of Archdeacon Dr Sola Igbari, who held responsibility for Inter Faith, Ecumenical and Inter Anglican Relations in the Church of Nigeria. During the consultation we had presentations describing Christian-Muslim relations in various countries, as well as in the continent of Africa as a whole. We worshipped and engaged in Bible study together, exploring key New Testament texts relating to the theme of 'Faith and Citizenship'. We experienced the situation on the grounds in Kaduna itself and were especially grateful to meet with Muslim members of the 'Bridge Builders' Association who work with Archbishop Josiah in helping Christians and Muslims in the Kaduna region to relate to each other more effectively. The full report of the Kaduna consultation as well as substantial other documentation from the meeting is available on the NIFCON website at

<http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/work/consultations/kaduna/report.cfm> .

Particularly significant is a substantial report on the topic of Faith and Citizenship in Africa, given by Revd Dr Johnson Mbillah, Director of PROCMURA (Programme for Christian Muslim Relations in Africa) which is available at

<http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/work/consultations/kaduna/presentations.cfm>

As a direct result of the consultation in Kaduna there was also NIFCON involvement in a training event organised by the Church of Sudan (*see below*).

2. Generous Love: The Truth of the Gospel and the Call to Dialogue.

This report, with the subtitle of *An Anglican theology of inter faith relations*, has been a ground-breaking piece of work undertaken by NIFCON throughout 2007 and early 2008. It is intended as a theology of inter faith relations rather than a theology of religions. It was produced as an initiative of NIFCON, and is commended by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who was consulted over its writing and production. It is intended as a 'marker' setting out certain Anglican principles in relation to engaging with people of other faiths at the beginning of the 21st century, drawing upon work done previously in this field eg *The Way of Dialogue* (produced for the Lambeth Conference in 1988). It was produced by a widely collaborative process that included

correspondence with 50 people from around the Anglican Communion. Although produced partly with the Lambeth Conference in mind, it is intended to have a much wider audience (as indeed has proved to be the case). It is available in hard copy (we are on the 4th print run) as well as on the NIFCON website at http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/resources/documents/generous_love_A4_with_foreward.pdf

Printed copies will be available for members of the Anglican Consultative Council in Jamaica. French and Spanish versions of the document are also available. We are now in process of producing a web-based study guide for *Generous Love*, which is likely to form the basis of an interactive session at the ACC meeting.

3. The Lambeth Conference

NIFCON was asked to take responsibility for organising the 'Engaging with Other Faiths' element of the Lambeth Conference. This involved suggesting the input for the Indaba groups on the day that 'Engaging with Other Faiths' was the topic of the day, as well as organising a considerable number of self-select sessions. In relation to the Indaba groups a DVD was produced which featured six bishops from different parts of the Anglican Communion talking about their respective contexts – in relation to the issue of engaging with people of other faiths. The DVD also featured an introduction to the document *Generous Love: The Truth of the Gospel and the Call to Dialogue*, which was then discussed in the Indaba groups. The range of self-select sessions organised by NIFCON included a session on the Holy Land – Israel /Palestine with Jewish, Christian and Muslim involvement; sessions on engaging with Islam in Africa by Johnson Mbillah of PROCMURA, an exploration of religious fundamentalism, and groups concerned with issues such as the pastoral care of converts. In the Lambeth Conference Reflections document *Generous Love* was commended for study in the Anglican Communion.

4. The Al Azhar dialogue and study exchange

Since 2003 NIFCON has administered the annual dialogue meeting between the Anglican Communion and AL Azhar Al Sharif, the historic Egyptian centre of Sunni Islam. This has continued with the meeting happening alternatively in Cairo and London. The most recent meeting of the dialogue, held in Cairo in November 2008, sought to take stock over where we had reached in the six years since the dialogue had begun, and suggested a list of topics that should be addressed over the coming three years. The communique from this most recent meeting can be found at http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/work/dialogues/al_azhar/cairo2008.cfm . However linked to the study exchange there has also been an innovative study exchange developed of younger Christian and Muslim scholars, with the scholars spending a few weeks in the institution of the other faith. This exchange has now happened twice, with younger male scholars in 2006 and younger female scholars very recently in 2009. This has proved very worthwhile both for the individuals themselves and for the sending and receiving institutions.

Because of the restrictions relating to the way that the project is funded the exchanges have had to be to/from the United Kingdom and Egypt. If funding can be obtained it would be excellent to make such an 'exchange' process much more multi-lateral. The study exchange also facilitated the visit of the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr Ali Gomaa in November 2006, in which he spent a week at Cambridge University, as well as an earlier visit by Sheikh Fawzy el Zefzaf, then Chair of the Al Azhar Committee for Dialogue with the Monotheistic Faiths. .

5. Christian-Muslim digest

In fulfilment of a mandate given to it at the 1998 Lambeth Conference to 'monitor Christian-Muslim relations' NIFCON has recently managed to establish a quarterly 'digest' which looks at how such relations are presented in the media – and analyses underlying trends. After a slow start on this project, the work was taken over at the end of 2008 by Dr John Chesworth who has now produced two substantial and informative issues, copies of which will be available in Jamaica. The January 2009 issue looks particularly at Tanzania and Kenya, the April 2009 issue will focus especially on Pakistan. It is hoped that eventually the issues of the digest will be collected together, and along with various country reports offered at NIFCON consultations form the basis of a substantial volume to be available at ACC 15. The digest is principally available in electronic form at <http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/digest/index.cfm> and copies are also emailed to a list of subscribers who have requested to receive it. We would be happy to include any members of ACC on this email list.

6. The NIFCON website

Mention has been made at several points above of the NIFCON website. This was substantially revamped and enlarged in the summer of 2007. It now contains a fairly comprehensive collection of documentation relating to Anglican involvement in inter faith work and is widely used as a resource both by members of the Communion and by ecumenical partners. The revision and enlargement of the website was largely the work of my colleague Susanne Mitchell.

7. Contact with correspondents around the world

As part of her career development Susanne moved on in September 2008 to another position linked to UK based inter faith relations. At the time of writing she has not yet been exactly replaced, although I have had some very helpful support from Suminder Duggal (who mainly works in Communication at the ACO). One of the tasks that Susanne undertook for NIFCON was the sustaining of the network of correspondents around the Anglican Communion. Since her departure it has not been possible to work proactively on this – although we have responded to enquiries etc, and publicised information about inter faith activities around the Communion that are sent to us for that purpose. When further assistance is available this is an area to re-develop, perhaps revising the way in which we approach this work.

8. The status of NIFCON; relations with colleagues on the Archbishop of Canterbury's staff

At the 2006 meeting of the Joint Standing Committee, NIFCON was given the status of a 'Working Party' in the Department of Theological Studies, the department of which I am the Director. This has allowed NIFCON (and where appropriate myself) to speak on behalf of and represent the Anglican Communion Office in the field of inter faith relations. One example of this has been our involvement in a consultation in October 2008 on Christian-Muslim relations that has been organised by the 'Christian World Communions', supported by the WCC. We facilitated the Anglican representation at that meeting. However NIFCON still remains in some important ways also a 'Network' of the Communion. Effectively the Management Group of NIFCON functions as the 'Working Party', supporting the wider Network extending through the Communion. The change of status to a 'Working Party' does not make any substantive difference to NIFCON's finances *i.e.* it does not receive funds from the core budget of the ACC.

Other aspects of NIFCON's structure have not altered: we still have three Presidents: Bishop Louis Tsui (Hong Kong); Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali (England); Bishop Josiah Idoju Fearon (Nigeria). Bishop Nazir-Ali and Bishop Fearon need, under NIFCON's constitution, to retire at the forthcoming meeting of the ACC, and we will be asking ACC 14 to approve the names of two Presidents to replace them (names and more details will be available at the meeting).

Since 2005 there has also been a development in the staff support that the Archbishop of Canterbury receives in this area, due to the fact that it is a clear priority for his ministry. I have enjoyed working closely with both Canon Guy Wilkinson and Canon Anthony Ball, the relevant staff members, and they have been very supportive of the work of NIFCON. There are of course some very significant initiatives that the Archbishop of Canterbury has taken in this field, such as *the Building Bridges* annual dialogue between a group of Christian and Muslim scholars, and the Archbishop's work in putting together a coordinated response to *A Common Word*, the letter of 138 Muslim scholars to Christian religious leaders. However as well as this work which is the direct responsibility of the Archbishop's staff at Lambeth Palace, there are some aspects of our work that involve both the Archbishop directly and the Anglican Communion structures. Primarily these are the dialogues between Anglicans and people of other faiths. The dialogue with Al Azhar was mentioned above; additionally there is a dialogue between the Archbishop and the Chief Rabbis of Israel and linked Anglican-Jewish Commission which was established in 2006; as a result of the Archbishop's recent visit to Libya there may also be a dialogue established with the World Islamic Call Society. The administration of such dialogues under the Archbishop is undertaken by Lambeth Palace along with staff of the Anglican Communion Office and it is hoped that this will be strengthened shortly by an additional Lambeth staff member managed through the ACO.

9. Wider involvement

Members of the NIFCON Management Group and myself have had a wide range of involvement with a number of inter faith activities around the Anglican Communion. Very recently (February 2009), there was been a training event organised by the Church of Sudan, and its Bishop for inter faith work, Bishop Andudu Elnail, to train clergy to minister more effectively in Muslim contexts. NIFCON raised some funding for this training event, and Bishop Michael Jackson of Clogher, Ireland, the Chair of NIFCON's Management Group, participated in the meeting and gave a number of the addresses. I myself will be speaking on Anglican inter faith work at a conference organised in April 2009 by the Bishop of Lahore. I also participated in a conference in March 2008 organised by Georgetown University at which I was asked to speak about Anglican approaches to engaging with Islam. Some members of NIFCON's Management Group also participate in the Church of England's 'Presence and Engagement Task Group' – which looks at how Anglican churches can witness and minister more effectively in contexts in which Christians are a minority. As part of its work the Task Group has put together some competency grids which look at the training needs for clergy and laity in such contexts. The Task Group has also produced a resource called *Encouraging Reading*, ten substantial and very useful Bible studies on Old Testament texts designed for use by Christians who are living and ministering in situations where issues like the relationship of the Abrahamic faiths, attitudes to the stranger, inter faith marriage, and conversion cannot be avoided. These are be found at <http://www.presenceandengagement.org.uk/resources.php?1> and some copies will be available at the ACC meeting.

10. Priorities for the future

At the November 2008 meeting of the Management Group, as well as reflecting on our contribution to the Lambeth Conference, we sought to identify our priorities for the coming five years. In addition to continuing and developing most of the work referred to above, and in particular ensuring that the study guide for *Generous Love* is produced and made widely available, we have identified two areas to which we will be seeking to make a more substantial contribution. These are 'advocacy' and 'training'. We believe that NIFCON needs to develop ways to help the Anglican Communion speak and respond more effectively to the situation and needs of Christians in difficult contexts where they are a religious minority. We also believe that after finishing the study guide to *Generous Love* it will be appropriate to seek to provide other training resources for Anglican Christians relating to inter faith concerns, and, as in the recent case of the Sudan, be willing, as far as possible, to support training organised by Anglican Provinces. Alongside these priorities ideally we are hoping to hold a regional consultation in East Asia, given the region's particular inter faith profile, to complement those already held in Bangalore (2003) and Kaduna (2007)¹. It is of course important to reiterate that NIFCON does not receive any direct funding from the ACC budget, so these priorities (and any other work that NIFCON undertakes) need to be funded by successful applications to grant-making bodies.

There is however another project that we hope to work towards. 2013 will be the 100th anniversary of the birth of Bishop Kenneth Cragg, an Anglican and global pioneer in the field of engaging with people of other faiths. He has been an inspiration for many who work in this field. We hope to plan a conference to take place before then, which will have as its subject matter Anglican engagement with other faiths over the last 100 years or so. The material from this conference will be published in a commemorative book intended to appear in 2013.

We invite ACC to endorse the ongoing work of NIFCON and these specific priorities, and to ratify the names put forward to be Presidents of NIFCON.

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¹ There was additionally a consultation held in Oslo in December 2003, focusing on inter faith issues in Western Europe. There was NIFCON participation in this event, although it was organised by representatives of the Anglican and Lutheran (Porvoo) Churches involved.