



Workshop Report

MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS IN IRELAND

How can we understand, respect and cooperate with each other?

Organised by the Mid-West Interfaith Network and facilitated by Cois Tine



Report Compiled by Gerry Forde, Cois Tine

LEDP, Roxboro Rd, Limerick. 30th June 2012

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INTRODUCTION: The Workshop was organised by the Mid-West Interfaith Forum and facilitated by Cois Tine.



The Mid-West Interfaith Network was founded in June 2010. The members represent diverse faith groups in Limerick and its environs including the Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Baha'i and Zoroastrian traditions among others. The group has met regularly since its inception aiming to build an understanding of one another's faith traditions and to create bonds of friendship and mutual understanding. www.midwestinterfaith.org



Cois Tine is a Cork City based organisation founded in 2002 to provide pastoral support for immigrants, especially asylum seekers and particularly those of African origin. Cois Tine respects diversity and promotes the integration of people from all communities, cultures and faiths. www.coistine.ie

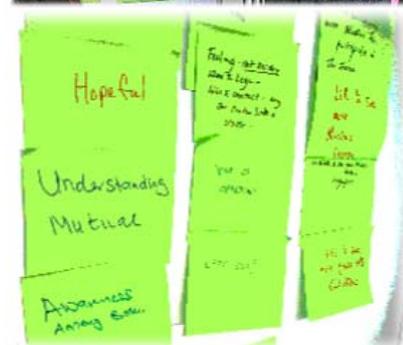
Purpose of the Day: The Workshop was designed to achieve a number of objectives:

- To give participants an understanding of what Interreligious dialogue is and why it is needed.
- To provide participants with an overview of what Islam and Christianity have to say about cooperation and dialogue with people of the other faith.
- To promote openness to dialogue and cooperative interaction between Muslims and Christians in the Mid-West Region.
- To identify practical means and methods for engaging in dialogue.

Methodology: The workshop and consultation roundtables on the day were facilitated using PLA (Participatory Learning and Action) methodology. This action-based research is consensual, democratic and participatory. It ensures that participants are motivated to engage, to examine issues reflectively, and to take ownership of actions on issues that affect them and their communities.

Following input from the Speakers participants were divided into three groups. Specific questions were discussed. Participants responses (recorded on Post-It notes, in voice recordings, in subsequent conversations and e-mails) were used to draw up this report.

Using the questions below, we examined how Muslims and Christians in the Mid-West are engaging with each other, what challenges we face in promoting better understanding, and what actions we can take to promote the vision that we see for the future, in which Muslims and Christians have greater understanding of each other, and actively work together to promote vibrant integrated communities.



PROGRAMME

- **Pre-Session**
An Overview of Islam
Facilitator: Gerry Forde, Cois Tine.
- **Workshop**
- **Opening Remarks**
Gerry Forde, Cois Tine.
Full text – Appendix I
- **Islam and Dialogue with Christians**
Speaker: Sheikh Dr Umar al- Qadri
Summary – Appendix II
- **Christianity and Dialogue with Muslims**
Dr Chris Hewer
Summary Appendix III
- **Group-work session 1**
The current situation and issues to be addressed.
Facilitator: Kathy O'Connor, The Integration Centre.
- **Group-work session 2**
What is our Vision for the future and what can we do to make this vision a reality
Facilitator: Fr Angelo Lafferty SMA, Cois Tine.
- **Closing Remarks**
Rev Dr Keith Scott, Mid-West Interfaith Network.

Attendance: Twenty seven people participated in the Workshop. With the exception of the Church of Ireland the attendance of people with a religious leadership role was very low even though much effort went into contacting individuals to attend. The fact that only two Muslims participated and that the only Catholic Clergyman present was one of the facilitators of the event was disappointing. This absence is perhaps symptomatic of the low priority given to Interreligious Dialogue.

Speakers: The workshop was most fortunate to have two speakers who not only have great expertise in their fields of study but who also have had considerable experience of promoting Interreligious dialogue between Muslims and Christians.

Sheikh Dr Umar Al-Qadri.

Sheik al-Qadri is a member of the Irish Council of Imams and founder of Al-Mustafa Islamic Cultural Centre Ireland. Among the aims of the Centre are the promotion of peace, harmony, integration, tolerance and also the promotion of friendly relations between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Dr Chris Hewer.

Dr Hewer has a background in Christian theology, education and Islamic Studies and has worked in the field of Muslims in Britain and Christian-Muslim relations since 1986. From 1999 to 2005 he worked as the Adviser on Inter-Faith Relations to the Bishop of Birmingham, and from 2006 to 2010 was the St Ethelburga Fellow in Christian-Muslim Relations.

THANK YOU: The Limerick Workshop could not have taken place without the help and cooperation of many people. We are particularly indebted to the Speakers whose input and participation in group sessions helped, in no small measure, to achieve the objectives outlined above.

Thanks also to the venue Staff who were most helpful and flexible.

On a number of levels the help of Doras Luimní made the Workshop possible. Apart from its role in the founding of the Mid-West Interfaith Network, it was also involved in preliminary planning

meetings and provided logistical support during the organisation of the event. For this contribution our sincere thanks.

The efforts and work by members of the Mid-West Interfaith Network in preparing for and running the event is also appreciated.

We are also grateful to the Integration Centre for the contribution of Kathy O'Connor in organising and facilitating this event.

G. Forde, Cois Tine,
St Mary's, Popes Quay, Cork



WORKSHOP REPORT

The Workshop was preceded by a session providing an Overview of Islam. This presentation, designed for non-Muslims, was delivered in recognition of the fact that most people in Ireland have little or no understanding of Islam. A text version of this presentation can be downloaded from www.coistine.ie/dialogue

Opening remarks: These set the Workshop within the context of the demographic change that is happening in Ireland. A significant part of this has been the growing presence of Muslims.

Interreligious Dialogue was defined as *“All positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of faith which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment, in obedience to truth and respect for freedom.”*

Dialogue and Proclamation

Dialogue seeks to build constructive relationships and understanding between people of different faiths. Dialogue is not about talking away or brushing over differences in what we believe. It is not about coming to a common belief or about converting the other. In dialogue each party remains true to their own faith while respecting the right of the other to believe and practise their own

While Dialogue on theological and official levels is necessary it is the Dialogue of Life, the ordinary business of getting on with each other – of being good neighbours and living in peace and harmony that was highlighted as being the most relevant for how we, Muslims and Christians live our faith in the now multicultural and multi-religious Ireland.

The text of this input is available in Appendix 1

Islam and Dialogue with Christians - Shaykh Dr Umar al-Qadri.

Interreligious dialogue is a means of getting closer to God because, “According to our divine texts and your divine texts our way to get closer to God is to care for humanity. Interfaith dialogue is not about preaching; it is about sharing...It is not about confrontation it is about cooperation... in fact it is all about becoming human.”

The example of the Prophet is a guide for dialogue as it shows how Muslims should engage with Christians. The Charter of Privileges granted by the Prophet Muhammad is an example of this. Its existence and its validity for today is unknown to many Muslims. Our followers, Muslims and Christians, need to be educated in what our texts say about tolerance about acceptance.

A more detailed summary of this input is available in Appendix II

Christianity and Dialogue with Muslims - Dr Chris Hewer

The input from Dr Hewer focused on four interconnected areas:

- Providing principles for Christian involvement in Dialogue.
- The need to communicate clearly during Dialogue.
- The positive change in the Christian attitude towards Dialogue with Muslims.

- Personal reasons for a commitment to Dialogue

A summary of Dr Hewer's address is given in Appendix III

Group Exercise 1: In order to identify the current state of relations between Muslims and Christians in the Mid-West Region the following question was addressed. *What are your feelings about Muslim - Christian relations in the Mid-West Region?*



Positive feelings such as openness, hope, curiosity, a wish to welcome and to build positive relationships were expressed by many participants along with a desire to engage in cooperation. However, it soon emerged that people did not know how to do this or who to turn to for information and guidance. The focus of discussions then turned to the barriers that prevent or hinder efforts to build positive Muslim Christian relations. Four specific areas were highlighted

- Xenophobia, Prejudice, Fear and Suspicion.** Shown through distrust, intolerance and suspicion, these feelings maintain the barriers that stoke resistance to cooperation and even antagonistic attitudes between Muslims and Christians. It was agreed that these feelings are fed by prejudiced media coverage, stereotypes and a high level of ignorance regarding the other's beliefs. Biased interpretations of history and culture also contribute to the negativity that prevents the contact and interaction needed for dialogue to take place.
- Disinterest and apathy towards religion,** especially towards the institutional Church. Many people, especially among the Christian community, are not interested in or sure of their own faith. As a result they bother even less with understanding or knowing about the faith of others. Still others, both Muslim and Christian, feel they have nothing to learn from or need no contact with members of the other faith. This disinterest and apathy are common and they contribute to the lack of interaction and dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

The current reality is that, due to the reasons outlined above, little or no relationship exists between Muslims and Christians. In practice there is very little contact or interaction between people of the two faiths beyond what is absolutely necessary in the course of everyday life. There is little or no wish to delve any deeper or to try to understand each other. This resistance to interaction and meaningful contact also prevents dialogue

- Ignorance.** Yet a third issue that affects the relationship, or lack of one, between Muslims and Christians is that even people who are interested in promoting dialogue and good interreligious relations are not sure how to respond or behave in the presence of people from the other faith. Rather than offend it is easier to do nothing. Many people feel at a loss as to how to make contact. There is a lack of structures and of information that would encourage, guide and facilitate the understanding needed for contact and dialogue. As a result dialogue is not happening. People need to be supported through their own Muslim or Christian faith group. In effect they need to be given permission by their leaders to engage in dialogue, educated as to why it is needed and also in how to



engage in it. Structures and occasions for dialogue also need to be developed.

- d) **Lack of Leadership.** There was general agreement that promoting dialogue at the grassroots level of the local communities where Christians and Muslims live and meet is of primary importance. However, for this to happen the participation and engagement of Muslim and Christian leaders in the dialogue process is a crucial prerequisite. Leadership is an essential element for the active participation of Muslims and Christians in the process of dialogue. The current lack of leadership is a major reason why dialogue is not taking place.

Reaching Out. In the wider society it was felt that raising awareness and understanding of different cultures and faiths among those who do not practise or who nominally identify themselves with a particular faith is just as important as raising this same awareness among those who practice. Living in a just and peaceful society demands we all respect and cooperate with each other. Reaching those not actively involved in faith groups is therefore also necessary.

The imbalance in the attendance at the Workshop (see page 2 above) and the lack of Muslim - Christian interaction in community activities in general was highlighted both as a sign of the distrust that exists and also of the lack of understanding of what dialogue is all about. It was also felt that the Mid-West Interfaith Network should do more to seek the participation of Muslims in its meetings and activities.

Group Exercise 1 continued: Having identified the current reality participants were next asked: *What Issues need to be addressed to improve relations between Muslims and Christians?*

The general view of the discussion groups was that the importance of Interreligious dialogue to the future social wellbeing of the region and of Ireland is not fully understood or appreciated. Ways to shift Dialogue between Muslims and Christians up the priority list need to be found and communicated especially to those who can effect change or who can provide the leadership and encouragement that is crucial for its success.

The Role of Leaders: This is the major issue that needs to be addressed in order to improve relations between Muslims and Christians. While there is a level of mutual respect and even contact between religious leaders, there is little evidence of leaders promoting or providing positive guidance for dialogue between ordinary Muslims and Christians. The ordinary faithful may feel insecure or feel unable to represent their faith. Many are not even sure if interaction with people of other faiths is permitted or desirable. Certainly most have received no encouragement to do so. Leaders can provide this encouragement and also the guidance that needs to go with it.

Official communication and contact between leaders is very important. Dialogue at community or grass roots level will not take place unless contact and trust between the religious leaders of the two communities is first established. Only when such an example exists can cooperation and interaction spread to the wider Muslim and Christian communities. It is also important that religious leaders become involved in supporting and educating people for dialogue. In addition to establishing contact and communication with each other leaders also have an important role in providing clarity of purpose, i.e. in making widely known among the faithful the reasons why dialogue, interaction and cooperation between Muslims and Christians is important. (These are outlined in Appendix 1)

Common ground for dialogue needs to be established: This includes mechanisms, occasions and structures where people can meet and engage with each other in a safe and constructive way. Beyond the obvious role that leaders have in this respect we, as individuals also have a role. We will all need to make an effort, we will need to be open to each other and willing to listen and be patient with each other.



As a first step the occasions or topics on which Muslims and Christians interact should focus on areas that are not overtly religious or contentious. Areas of common interest could be the focus for interaction and dialogue, e.g. community safety, family or neighbourhood concerns. Cooperation on these levels would help to break down barriers, overcome stereotypes and create relationships. This will allow trust to grow which, in turn, will allow any tensions or contentious issues to be addressed in a constructive and non-polemical way. Another suggestion made was to request the local authority to facilitate initial contacts and the process of establishing the common ground as a neutral body that representatives of both religions could respond to. In this way neither the Muslim nor the Christian communities would be the “organisers,” “leaders” or the group “in control.” Rather both would be equal participants in the dialogue process.

Education - a key issue: The need to address the ignorance and lack of understanding that exists between Christians and Muslims was identified as a key issue to be addressed in order to improve relations. Through education the ignorance that breeds suspicion, stereotypes and tension can be overcome. Education needs to happen on all levels, among all age groups and by using a variety of methods and means (see below). Education to understand what Dialogue is, what it is not and what it aims to achieve is also very important. This needs to be disseminated within faith groups and by every possible means in order to create a favourable climate for dialogue and to break down negativity and overcome apathy.

Education is key to providing Muslims and Christians with a true and balanced understanding of each other’s faith, culture and values. As mentioned above sharing and interaction on an informal level where religion is not the focus could be a valuable medium for education. Cultural, art or sporting events could be occasions where mutual understanding, appreciation and trust can grow and where Muslims and Christians can experience “we” rather than “us” and “them.” More formal occasions for education are also needed. If and when visits to each other’s places of worship take place these occasions need to be explained and guided so that offence or embarrassment is avoided and that the mutual respect needed for dialogue is shown.

Information materials, resources, workshops and courses could also be made available to promote a true understanding of each other. Such courses could also have a particular focus on preparing people to engage in dialogue. Making positive input such as that given by speakers in this workshop widely available would also help raise awareness of and support for Dialogue.

Existing organisations and groups, for example Muslim and Christian Students groups in the University of Limerick, Sporting Groups etc. could also be contacted with a view to getting them to engage in or become aware of the possibility for dialogue in their own settings.

The media was identified as an important tool for education. In general however, it has not helped relations between Muslims and Christians. Negative and unbalanced reporting has helped to perpetuate the stereotyping and mistrust of Muslims and

apathy towards Christian Churches. This needs to be challenged. Balanced and more positive coverage needs to be encouraged. The Media could be used in promoting interreligious understanding and dialogue. The programme “Nationwide” was specifically mentioned – this could for example be invited to focus on the work of the Mid-West Interfaith Network or on efforts being made to create cooperative interreligious relationships. Opportunities should be sought to use the media, local newspapers or radio to positively raise awareness of religious and cultural diversity and to promote mutual understanding and dialogue.

Group Exercise 2

The last exercise of the day focused participants’ attention on identifying a vision - the situation they would like to see existing in terms of Muslim - Christian relations in the future.

**What is our shared vision?
What would we like to see, in terms of Muslim Christian relations in the Region in five/ten years’ time?**



WE HAVE A DREAM.....

Ten years from now regular contact, interaction and cooperation between the Muslim and Christian communities will be the norm. The establishment of this situation will be as a result of facilitation by the City Council over a number of years. Structures and mechanisms for interfaith activities will have been established. Practical educational material aimed at fostering understanding will exist having been developed both within individual faith groups and through cooperation between Muslims and Christians. As a result a situation where we, Muslims and Christians are comfortable in each other’s company will exist. While aware of our differences we have come to a level of trust where we can accept and cooperate with each other in spite of them - our differences are no longer issues of contention or polemic.

This situation will have come into being for a number of reasons. An educational programme on diversity will be part of the School Curriculum in the region. This will have provided awareness of different religions and of their positive attitude to dialogue, understood as mutual respect and cooperation. Diverse cultures and religions are presented as enriching and opportunities where we can learn from each other. Outside of the school situation a variety of methods to foster understanding, harmony and tolerance on all levels of society will have been used.

In this vision a unique interfaith cooperation has been built in which all understand that regular contact or dialogue between the Muslim and Christian communities is in no way assimilation - each community remains true to its own beliefs and values and each community respects the freedom and religious practice of the other. The focus of the relationship between the two communities is on “The Home we want to build together.”

Making this vision a reality will take years of ground work, commitment and effort. Leaders will have to become involved. They will need to open themselves to the process of dialogue, be willing to take risks in order to build trust and to overcome opposition and difficulty. Many interfaith occasions and events will need to take

place in order to replace fear, suspicion and ignorance with trust and friendship and understanding.



Group Exercise 2 continued: The second part of this exercise took a less aspirational view focusing on the identification of practical steps or means towards making this vision a reality. The question addressed was; **What can we do (positive actions) to work towards making our vision a reality?**

Some of the suggestions for action below are logical extensions to what was discussed in group sessions and in subsequent conversations and emails.

- **Engage the media:** The Mid-West Interfaith Network and faith groups themselves could seek to use the media positively to promote interreligious understanding and respect. Provide journalists with information – make it easy for them to publish good news stories about Muslims and Christians.
 - Seek to publicise all Interfaith Network activities.
 - Use the media to communicate a true understanding of their own faith.
 - Seek out and make use of people who can write about dialogue and interreligious cooperation from within the Muslim and Christian communities.
 - Challenge inaccurate or biased reporting.
 - Use the Mid-West Interfaith Network website to promote and publicise material on Dialogue,
 - Link with other (e.g. Diocesan, Mosque, NGO) websites in order to widen readership of pro-dialogue material and also to build resources for dialogue.
- **Contact local faith groups:** Another positive role for the Network or for participants representing faith groups would be to promote dialogue and education for dialogue among Organisations, Parishes, Mosques and Churches by actively seeking them out with a view to engaging them in the Dialogue process.
 - Develop a database of parishes; groups etc. – e-mail information promoting dialogue in a short format that could easily be used on notice boards and in Parish Bulletins.
 - Use database to disseminate more detailed educational or resource material on dialogue.
 - Use available materials to communicate what dialogue is and why it is necessary.
 - Provide on-going contact through email – provide updates regarding activities, pass on useful information or articles about interfaith activities and events.
 - Regularly invite people to participate in the Network – and repeat these invitations.
 - Broaden participation in the Network – invite student groups etc.
 - Organise events or discussions around specific topics or areas of common interest and invite as wide an audience as possible.
 - Seek or facilitate ways for faith leaders to meet and engage with each other.
 - Give talks in schools or to youth/adult groups.
 - Organise or participate in an annual Interfaith Prayer Event.
- **Make a personal commitment to dialogue and to preparing oneself for dialogue:**
 - Engage in Dialogue – make an effort to communicate and cooperate with neighbours of different faiths – be the one who takes the first step.
 - Greet them on the occasion of their religious feasts.
 - Show respect for the religious customs and practices of others.

- Use any opportunity available to interact and mix with members of other faith communities.
- Focus on what we as Muslims and Christians hold in common as the context for dialogue.
- Encourage and teach children to respect people of other faiths and cultures.
- Volunteer for work with Schools and Youth Groups (to promote interaction and understanding).
- Seek to include or welcome members of other faiths in any activity, community service or voluntary work.
- Given an example of openness to dialogue and of respect for the faith of others.
- Participate in courses or events at which one can learn more about the faith of others.

NEXT STEPS: Having begun our group discussions by concentrating on problems and obstacles the input from speakers and the ideas emerging from discussions allowed participants to have a more positive and hopeful view of the future. The following method for fruitful interaction between Muslims and Christians emerged during the day.

Focus on a specific issue or topic for dialogue rather than on the more general and daunting concept of “Interfaith Dialogue” which may scare some people off. This is a much more practical approach that will help the development of the shared common ground in which people of both faiths can safely engage in dialogue. Using this method participants can:

- Gain an experience of interaction,
- Come to know that they are welcome and
- that their beliefs will be respected.
- That the purpose of the interaction is constructive and not argumentative.

One suggestion developed from the Vision outlined above was to have a discussion around the idea of the “The home we want to Build together.” This is a topic that touches on our values, behaviour and beliefs. What sort of society do we, Muslims and Christians, want in this region? As neighbours what do we want of each other? Addressing these questions could be a good way of engaging with each other in a fruitful and enlightening dialogue.

As a follow up there could perhaps be some sort of public awareness raising of the results of this dialogue – thus communicating with the wider community and hopefully raising interest in the dialogue process. Perhaps such a dialogue process could be repeated in many places and neighbourhoods thus widening the experience of interaction and include those in the community who do not practise their Faith.

CONCLUSION: At present many people are simply unaware of the need for interreligious dialogue and some, misguidedly, are opposed to it. These facts should not stop our efforts to build interaction and understanding between Christians and Muslims. The multi-religious and multicultural nature of our society is still a relatively new experience and so, for many, the fact that there is a need for an effort to be made to ensure that we can live together in peace and justice has not yet been realised.

As people of faith and as people who wish to build social harmony and justice we have a role in bringing about this realisation. There are people who will listen and who do appreciate the need for mutual respect, understanding and cooperation. We

can begin with these and perhaps through them others too will be convinced of the need for openness and dialogue between Muslims and Christians.

The Need for Muslim Christian Dialogue - Opening Address

Gerry Forde

In the past twenty or thirty years – all of us here have experienced great change in our lives. We all have had to come to terms with living in a society made up of people who, because of their origin culture or religion, are different from us.

From this change has come the need for us all to adapt – in other words to integrate. Integration involves both the newcomer and the native. It is a long process, one we have only begun and we are not yet certain where it will lead us to. But what is certain is that integration is very important in order to ensure that we build a society in which we and our children can live together in **peace, justice and harmony**.

In Ireland a significant element in the change of the last few decades has been the growing presence of Muslims. The 2011 National Census tells us that on the day the census was taken last year there were 49,204 Muslims present in Ireland.

In the past Muslims were seen as outsiders, visitors or students here for just a short time. Now this has changed, Muslims are Irish citizens a permanent part of the community. It is therefore, important that we all get on well together and that we have the level of understanding of each other to allow this to happen. Above all, it is important that we have mutual respect for each other in spite of cultural and religious differences. If we can do this we will have gone a long way towards having an integrated community. Whether or not this happens very much depends on what we do as individuals, communities and as a society. It depends on how we interact, on whether we build bridges or walls, on whether we include or exclude.

Interreligious Dialogue is a way to build bridges. Dialogue is important because it aims to bring about the understanding, mutual respect and cooperation that are essential both for integration and social harmony. Interreligious Dialogue is defined as:

“All positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of faith which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment, in obedience to truth and respect for freedom.” Dialogue and Proclamation

This definition tells us that Dialogue is about:

- building constructive relationships with people of other faiths
- building mutual understanding.
- each partner respecting the religious freedom of the other.

Dialogue allows mutual understanding, friendly relations and trust to be established and to grow. When these exist channels of communication are open. It's no longer a case of “us” and “them” – rather it is “we” – how can we work together to deal with a particular issue.

Dialogue tries to identify causes of tension between religious communities. Often these are not religious but economic, social or political. Dialogue can help build the understanding and confidence to overcome these tensions or to prevent them arising. Dialogue also breaks down barriers and stereotypes.

Sometimes it is as important to say what something **is not** as well as what it is. Dialogue is not about talking away or brushing over differences in what we believe. It is not about coming to a common belief or about converting the other. In dialogue each party remains true to their own faith while respecting the right of the other to believe and practise their own.

Dialogue can take place on academic or official levels between experts and theologians. For example, there are regular meetings between Christian and Muslim representatives at the Al Azhar University of Cairo. This is what is called *The Dialogue of Discourse*:

Dialogue also takes place on occasions of interfaith prayer and also on occasions when spirituality and religious texts are studied jointly, this is another area of dialogue requiring some level of expertise. This is called the *Dialogue of Religious Experience*.

Muslims and Christians share common values. For example both faiths place a strong emphasis on, Justice and on Peace. Both religions see human beings as stewards of God's creation entrusted with the care of the earth – we therefore have common concern for the Environment and for the prudent use of the world's resources. We can therefore, collaborate in social concerns inspired by our common religious motives and values. This is called the *Dialogue of Common Action*:

Finally and perhaps most importantly we have what is called the *Dialogue of Life*. This is the ordinary everyday business of getting on with each other, of being good neighbours and living in peace and harmony. This can be hard enough for a people of a common background but when religious and cultural differences exist more effort is needed. There will be a need to make an effort to reach out, to understand, to break down our own prejudices. We may have to be patient and to accept people's right to be different.

While all forms of Dialogue are important and have their place, the last two have a direct bearing on our lives and on how we live our faith in the now multicultural and multi-religious Ireland.

Perhaps some will ask: Why should we bother with Dialogue – why can't I just live in my world and you live separately in yours? No doubt the other speakers today will give reasons why dialogue is important.

I will finish with two quotations that show the importance of Dialogue. The first is from an address to Muslim Ambassadors made by Pope Benedict XVI in 2006:

"Inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is... a vital necessity, on which in large measure our future depends"

The second quotation is from a letter signed by 137 Muslims leaders sent to Christian leaders in 2007:

"Muslims and Christians together make up over half the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians."

On a world level there has, for many reasons, been a polarization in relations between Muslims and Christians. Yet here in Ireland the relationship between Muslims and Christians is good.

On the world level Interreligious dialogue can be a means of addressing the polarisation and tensions that exist. Here in Ireland Dialogue is important because it can - both be a means of preventing these tensions arising and of making our existing good relations even better.

Islam and Dialogue with Christians – a Summary Shaykh Dr Umar al-Qadri.

To illustrate the Islamic perspective on Interreligious dialogue Sheikh Al-Qadri quoted a hadith of the Prophet from *Mishkat ul Masabeeh* that is mirrored in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 25. The hadith tells of a man standing before God on the day of judgement. God says: “*There was a man who was hungry and if you had fed him you would have attained my pleasure, there was a man thirsty and if you had quenched his thirst you would have attained my pleasure.*” Interfaith dialogue, our focus point here, is not that we are here to be nice to each other – our reason to be here is to get closer to God. According to our divine texts and your divine texts our way to get closer to God is to care for humanity. Interfaith dialogue is not about preaching it is about sharing. It is not about converting it is about serving. It is not about winning it is about loving. It is not about becoming religious it is about becoming spiritual. It is not about proving it is about understanding. It is not about why? It is about why not and the possibilities. It is not about confrontation it is about cooperation. It is not about fame it is about peace. It is not about becoming superior, in fact it is all about becoming human.

Interfaith dialogue does not mean giving up one’s own identity. Interfaith dialogue would not be interfaith if one gave up one’s own identity. When we engage in dialogue we should avoid using unhelpful and unfair examples from history where people have not acted in accordance with the teachings of their own faith. In dialogue what should be quoted are the sources recognised within each faith as being true. Either, the texts of both religions or for Muslims the conduct of the Prophet. The Prophet is the one who has the correct conduct and his conduct reflects the true teaching of Islam. The example of the prophet is a guide for dialogue as it shows how Muslims should engage with Christians.

One example quoted from the life of the Prophet was his granting of a Charter of privileges to the Christians of Najran. It says: “*This is a message from Muhammad ibn Abdullah as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity near and far we are with them. Verily, I the servant the helpers and my followers defend them because Christians are my citizens and by Allah I hold out against anything that displeases them. No compulsion in religions is to be on them. Neither are their judges to be removed from their jobs, nor their monks from their monasteries. No one is to destroy a house of their religion or to damage it or to carry anything from it to the Muslims houses. Should anyone take any of these he will spoil God’s Covenant and disobey his Prophet. Verily, these are my allies and have my secure charter against all that they hate. No one is to force them to travel or to oblige them to fight. The Muslims are to fight for them. No one of the Muslim nation is to disobey this covenant till the last day.*”

So this covenant is applicable today – the only problem is that a lot of Muslims are not aware of it. Many Muslims today have a wrong perception of interfaith dialogue. Some think we have to keep the Christians as our enemies and those who adhere to this opinion will quote verses of the Quran out of context.

There are also Christians who deny the need for dialogue. Our followers, Muslims and Christians, need to be educated in what our texts say about tolerance about acceptance “

Sheikh Umar concluded his address by identifying the “Pillars of Dialogue.”

Both Islam and Christianity emphasise the dignity of mankind. We are all made in the image and likeness of God. We should both respect this dignity in each other.

We both believe in the same God who is Lord of all people and a mercy for all people. We should serve Him by living in peace with each other.

We have all been given scriptures to guide us to peace in our lives and in our society. The objective of the Quran and the Gospel is to get over conflicts in society not to create more conflicts.

Negative criticism is not permitted in dialogue – constructive criticism is fine but negative criticism – the use of abusive language is not constructive.

Lastly, we must learn how to love. Love is important in Islam as it is in Christianity. The Gospel of Matthew says: *“Many will say on that day Lord, Lord have we not prophesied in your name and in thy name cast out devils.”* But this will be rejected by Jesus Christ because they did all these wonderful things but lacked love. In Islam the same thing applies. The Prophet Muhammad said *“No matter how pious you are, if you worship God, if you fast during the day but if you are a source of evil in the society you are not an “Insan” - a human being”*. The Arabic word *“insan”* comes from the root *“uns”* meaning to love. All religion teaches us is basically to become human. Our religions, Christianity and Islam, teach us to become an *“insan”* - a human being. This means one who loves.

If we keep these things in mind, these foundations for dialogue, then our efforts at dialogue will be constructive. Otherwise it will be just meetings, great talks, great pictures and great reports – dialogue has to be really constructive.

Christianity and Dialogue with Muslims – a Summary Dr Chris Hewer

Christian Principles for Dialogue: The Christian engagement with Islam over the last 1400 years can be summed up as being the violation of the commandment “Do not bear false witness against your neighbour”. What we have done is to construct half-truths, lies and distortions of the others faith.

Secondly, the Christian commitment to engaging with people of other faiths is not based on reciprocity but on the Gospel command to “Love one another”. Therefore saying “I will come and talk when the Muslims come and talk” cannot be justified according to Christian principles.

Thirdly, We, Muslims and Christians, all share a common humanity. It is very hard to hate my brother if he is truly my brother.

The fourth principle is that in interfaith discussion we must not compare the ideals of one faith with the sordid realities of the other. We need to compare ideals with ideals and realities with realities.

We must also accept that it is up to Muslims to say what Islam is. This point needs to be made because throughout history there have been many Christians who want to tell Muslims what their Islam is.

Another crucial point to remember is that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. This is something that has often been neglected in the Christian Tradition. We will return to this point.

Theology seeks to explain what we believe in terms that are clearly understood. Theology in Islam began in Damascus in 641CE, less than ten years after the death of the Prophet, when Muslims met Christians educated in their faith. Inevitably questions arose - *Is this what you believe? - No not quite that – Then explain the difference to me.* The development of Islamic theology continued over time and in Baghdad in the 9th century it was helped by a huge translation process in which the ancient wisdom of Greece and Rome is translated into Arabic. This wisdom spread to Spain in 711CE. Here there is a very interesting experience. Jewish, Muslim and Christian scholars engage in theological debate together using the Arabic language and the philosophy of Aristotle. By having a common language and a common philosophical system they were able to discuss and debate with each other in terms they all understood in precisely the same way. Thus, the meaning of what they communicated to each other was clearly understood by all.

Hundreds of years later St Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest systematic theologians of the Middle Ages, was able to work only because he had access to the philosophy of Aristotle preserved in Arabic and especially in the writings of Ibn Rushd or Averroes as he came to be known in the Latin West. These were later translated into Latin and they allowed St Thomas to develop his theology using Aristotle’s clearly defined concepts, language and terms. If we want to engage in contact and dialogue with Muslims today, we need to learn from the past and make sure that the meaning of terms and concepts we use are understood in the same way by both Muslim and Christian participants.

The history of Christian-Muslim relations from the early period up until the mid-twentieth century is characterised by polemic and fighting. October 1965 marked the

beginning of change. Twenty years after the end of the Second World War the Second Vatican Council began. The Bishops, who attended, especially those from Europe, were very aware of what the Christians had done to the Jews in the Holocaust and of the extent to which Christian theological anti-Semitism was a contributory factor. The Council needed to respond to this. But a response to Judaism alone would not be sufficient. Bishops from the Muslim world and also those who worked among people of other religions also sought a response regarding the Church's view on relations with these religions.

The Document "Lumen Gentium" was the response that emerged. In respect to Muslims it says, "We esteem Muslims for their worship of God"– the same God we worship, the one God. This had not been said in any Christian official document in the previous 1400 years. This positive attitude to Muslims and to peoples of other faiths is further expanded in another document called *Nostra Aetate*. Yet a further step was taken in 1988 at the ten yearly Lambeth Conferences – the gathering of the principal leaders of the Anglican Communion. They said – "and we will correct one another" – in other words Christians and Muslims do not only worship the same God but learn from one-another.

We worship the one God. Therefore on a personal level I feel obliged to promote interreligious relations because on the day of judgement I will have to stand before that one God. What could I answer if, on that day, God says to me, "*Why were you so arrogant that you thought you had nothing to learn from the Muslims who worship Me just as you do? What made you so arrogant that you say that I, God could not speak to you, a Christian, through them*". I am not engaged in Muslim-Christian relations just to build social cohesion or to do good to humanity. I am also engaged as a worshipper before God wanting to hear the voice of God speaking to me through the lives of my Muslim brothers and sisters – wanting to hear the voice of God through the Quran and through the tradition of the prophet.

To what extent can I say that the eternal word of God speaks to me as a Christian through the Quran? To what extent can I say that the Prophet Muhammad is a blessing for all the worlds? How is he an exemplar of perfect humanity for me? Muhammad is as much my possession; the Quran is as much my possession as it is of a Muslim. Muslims do not own the Quran, they do not own Muhammad. He is the prophet of all humankind; the Quran is guidance for all human beings. Therefore we owe it to our relationship with God to be engaged with and recognise God's action in another faith community.

Dialogue is about two human beings side by side before God not just sitting talking with each other, this is only part of it. Dialogue is allowing my heart to sense that of God at work in the life of my Muslim brother and sister. Once I accept that God is at work in the life of my dialogue partner then our hearts lead us, in the Spirit of God, to actually come into an understanding in interfaith relationship.

