



MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS IN IRELAND

Exploring how we can understand, respect and cooperate with each other

Report on Workshop/Discussion at Wilton Parish Centre,
Wed 22nd June 2011

In all forty one people took part in the Workshop. Six were involved in the organisation or facilitation of the event. Among the remaining thirty four participants eleven were Muslim and twenty three Christian. Sixteen participants were women and twenty four men.

The Workshop began with a short presentation outlining the need for Interreligious Dialogue between Muslims and Christians in Ireland. This also defined what Dialogue is and what it aims to achieve. The presentation made it clear that Dialogue is about building constructive relationships with people of other faiths. It aims at bringing about mutual understanding with each partner respecting the religious freedom of the other. Dialogue is a necessary part of the process of integration that needs to happen in Ireland. **(Notes of this presentation are given in a separate paper)**

The first group exercise of the workshop focused on identifying the current situation. Participants were divided into four working groups and asked to address the following questions:

- a. **Where are we today, in Ireland and Cork, in relation to Muslims and Christians and their understanding of each other?**
- b. **What are the Issues?**
- c. **What are our Feelings?**

Below is the amalgamated feedback from the four working groups.

- a. **Where are we today, in Ireland and Cork, in relation to Muslims and Christians and their understanding of each other?**

It was unanimously agreed that there is a general lack of understanding and even ignorance of each other's religions. The present situation is characterised by:

- A confusion of customs, cultural practices and religion – need for greater understanding to distinguish between these.
- Christians have little understanding of Islam with views shaped by negative media stereotypes.
- A lack of communication and interaction between Muslims and Christians.
- A lack of both formal and social opportunities for Muslims and Christians to meet.
- Participants highlighted that many people (Muslims and Christians) don't care or are not open to integration or dialogue.
- The media poses a huge challenge – Islam is often portrayed negatively engendering an unfounded fear of Muslims living in our community.

- In general the relationship between Muslims and Christians is characterised by a focus on what divides us rather than on what we have in common.
- The present good will (between Muslims and Christians in Ireland) is very positive. However, it is superficial and needs to be deepened through education for greater mutual understanding and interaction that builds relationships and trust.

b. What are the Issues? (i.e. affecting Muslims Christian relations in Ireland.)

- A Lack of knowledge and understanding.
- Confusion of cultures and religions i.e. not being able to distinguish culture from religion.
- The negative and generalised Media coverage of Islam and Muslims.
- The fact that policy, practice and procedures – have not caught up with the cultural and religious changes in society.
- A lack of Muslim representation and input in public/political and policymaking bodies.
- People not willing to engage in dialogue as they do not know how to do so and as a result fear making mistakes.
- A lack of education and training for dialogue.
- The lack of involvement of religious leaders in the promotion of dialogue.
- Language barriers – communication is essential to building relationships and avoiding misunderstanding.
- A general view that all Muslims are the same – they are not.

c. What are our Feelings?

While there was some positive feeling that diversity was an opportunity, participants overall feelings about the current relationship between Muslims and Christians were negative and based on a lack of understanding and the media portrayal of Muslims. Feelings reported were:

- Fear - based on a lack of understanding each other.
- Fear - that if we do not learn to live together there will be future problems.
- Suspicion - based on terrorism and media reporting.
- Unease – regarding Muslim culture, especially the dominance of men and treatment of women. The Hijab debate and Shariah Law were mentioned in connection with this.
- Worry - that one's own identity will be lost by becoming involved in Dialogue and Integration.
- Distrust – are Muslims only interested in Dialogue when they are in the minority?

The next session was a presentation giving brief overview of Islam and of what Muslims believe. This presentation was set in the context of the current portrayal of Islam in the media which is dominated by reporting of Muslim extremist activities. (The text of this presentation is given in a separate paper)

The final group session of the day focused on where we as Muslim and Christians would like to see our relationship be in five years' time. The following questions were addressed:

- d. What is our shared vision?**
- e. What could block this vision?**
- f. What can we do to work towards making our vision a reality?**

d) A shared Vision

In five years' time our vision is of an inclusive and cohesive community. Muslims and Christians will live together in a situation where mutual understanding and interaction between Muslims and Christians has increased. People see those living next door first as neighbours, whether they are Christian or Muslim. Muslims are seen as a normal and welcome part of society.

The increased understanding that we envisage will have been facilitated and promoted by the example of on-going contact and dialogue between religious leaders. A Muslim Christian Forum will exist and work to promote interfaith cooperation and action on the local level. It will provide structures for sharing information and for on-going dialogue, mediation and community building. Interreligious contact, dialogue and cooperation are encouraged on all levels using sport, social and community activities. This community based interaction will be promoted and facilitated by trained outreach workers and volunteers from both communities whose work is overseen by the Muslim Christian Forum. Muslims in Cork will have a purpose built place of worship in Cork and an Islamic Cultural Centre.

This forum will also have a role in providing positive input to Media with a view to providing a balanced view of both faiths, promoting shared activities and publicising the cooperative projects Muslims and Christians will be involved in.

Overall, our vision hopes that the relationship between Muslims and Christians will be characterised by a focus on the values we have in common rather than on what divides us and that both faiths will be committed to a sustained programme of interaction, engagement and dialogue. We hope that Dialogue will lead us to a mutual understanding, respect and cooperation that will benefit our community, the world we share and also serve and honour the One Lord we believe in.

e) What could block this vision?

- The fear, distrust and suspicion that exists between Muslims and Christians.
- The stereotyping prejudice and negativity coming via the Media - all Muslims prejudged by the actions of an extremist minority.
- The lack of knowledge regarding what is sacred to Muslims and Christians.
- The current focus on what divides rather than on what Christians and Muslims hold in common.
- The lack of communication between Muslims and Christians.
- A lack of planning regarding integration and inclusion of Muslims.
- Laws and policies are not adjusted to our new society and so do not yet include other cultures and religions adequately. E.g. planning regulations make it difficult to set up places of worship for small groups.
- The lack of leadership – or involvement of religious leaders in promoting dialogue.

- The lack of facilities and funding for education or learning about each other.
- Individualism and the lack of community consciousness.
- Lack of openness to each other, apathy, inertia, closed minds.
- The recession and competition for jobs evokes jealousy, resentment and friction in society – “they are taking our jobs.”
- Language barriers that prevent communication.

f) What can we do to work towards making our vision a reality?

In order to work towards our desired vision for the future and to overcome blocks in achieving it the following actions were identified. Some are long-term, some involve leaders and institutions and some are areas we can all contribute to.

EDUCATION FOR UNDERSTANDING

There was a very strong awareness of the need for greater knowledge and education. This would allow an understanding of each other’s faith and also of what dialogue is and what it aims to achieve. This education needs to take place on all levels. For example by equipping teachers with the knowledge they need to pass on to young people in their care. School curriculums need to include a space for interreligious education and also for understanding what dialogue is. In the wider community there need to be facilities for sharing information about other religions and promoting mutual understanding of each other’s traditions.

Interaction and communication between Muslims and Christians should be encouraged and facilitated on all levels and by all possible means. forums, workshops, open days and social events can all be occasions for dialogue as can the medium of sport or community activities. Most important is the promotion of respect and understanding between Muslim and Christian neighbours in local streets and residential areas. Members of both faiths need to come to know each other personally.

Joint initiatives or projects that build on our shared values could be undertaken as a means of encouraging constructive contact. These could, for example, promote Justice and Peace or care of the environment and be places where mutual understanding and respect can grow. In addition these initiatives would make a worthwhile contribution to our community. Places and times for encounter and sharing need to be established and more opportunities for dialogue and working toward shared goals need to be created. Perhaps a system (and guidelines) for visiting each other’s homes could be set up.

The establishment of a Christian Muslim Dialogue Forum was also suggested. Such a body would, of course, need the participation of religious leaders from both faiths. This could both encourage and oversee the dialogue process. It could establish an agreed approach, guidelines for dialogue as well as training for outreach workers. The forum could also have a mediation role and so help prevent community tensions.

A RESPONSE TO NEGATIVE MEDIA

Work for dialogue and cooperation should be publicised as a means of countering negative coverage of religion in general and of Islam in particular. Positive media

coverage of cooperative action would give a more balanced view of Muslims. Both Christians and Muslims should cooperate to gain access to and make better use of the local media to provide a counter narrative to negative media perceptions. The Muslim Christian Dialogue Forum could organise and be a focus for this narrative. It could develop a common response and input to local media and also challenge unfair or biased reporting.

In addition to the cooperative use of the media outlined above Muslims should also seek access the local media to broadcast their openness to interaction and participation in the community.

THE NEED FOR LEADERSHIP

The need for Religious leaders and scholars to come together and lead by example was stressed in feedback from all four working groups. Since Interreligious Dialogue is, for members of both faiths, something unfamiliar and which may cause some anxiety, the role of religious leaders is crucial for its success. Leadership and the support of leaders are needed to drive interaction and dialogue. Agreed Guidelines for Dialogue need to be established as do outreach programmes to promote dialogue. Individuals, Muslim and Christian, involved in this should be trained in common agreed aims of interaction and dialogue (a common training programme?). Perhaps the work of this outreach could be overseen by the Muslim Christian Dialogue Forum.

SOCIAL INCLUSION OF MUSLIMS

The lack of representation and participation of Muslims in public and political bodies such as the City Council means that the voice of Muslims is not being heard in the process of amending policies and practices that is part and parcel of integration. Socially, politically and in business Muslims should be encouraged to engage in active citizenship and in the work of promoting inclusivity, for example in the workplace. There is a need for greater Muslim engagement in social, voluntary and community activities in order to contribute to and be part of an Ireland that is more inclusive and integrated.

RESOURCE NEEDS

At present there are no facilities or structures dedicated to the promotion of Interreligious Dialogue. The need for resources and funding to enable these and also to support and sustain the shared actions outlined above was also highlighted.

While some dialogue and interaction will take place between Muslims and Christians naturally, in the course of everyday life, it will not be sustained or capable of overcoming challenges unless it is supported by financial, human and leadership resources.

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