

# CIRcular



For Friends involved in local ecumenical and interfaith work

Issue 24

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## Tolerance

### Minute 07/04 of the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations.

Minute 06.96 of Colchester and Coggeshall Monthly Meeting has been forwarded to us together with Minute 6a of 4th November from Meeting for Sufferings. The MM is concerned about the growth of religious intolerance and Meeting for Sufferings has asked the meeting to consult this committee and QPSW.

Richard Seebohm, a member of this committee and also of the MM, has introduced the topic to us and explained the MM's thinking. We share the concern about intolerance and note that religion is often intertwined with issues of race and culture. There is also an increasing secular intolerance towards any public manifestation of religion. What is the basis of this intolerance? How much is it fear? fear of the stranger? fear of economic loss? or fear of change? How much is it fed by those with a political agenda?

We have heard of the work of the Churches Commission on Racial Justice and their funding to support a worker in the area of Blackburn, Oldham and Bradford. We note that other church national bodies have made public statements about the intolerance that bears on religious and ethnic minority groups. We are aware of how faiths work together throughout the nations to support Religious Education in schools.

We have heard also of the work which Colchester and Coggeshall Friends are doing themselves. Intolerance may be combated

when members of churches and faiths work together. Successful work depends on the patient building up of relationships; each meeting is able to do this in its own local area.

As Quakers we have the support of our testimonies on equality, peace and justice. We can use these as a basis for what we say and do. As John Woolman talked with slave owners rather than condemning them but without yielding his principles, so we have to ask ourselves whether we are approaching in the right way those who express intolerance. Are we prepared to take our share in forming public opinion? It requires the effort to write letters to newspapers and other media. It requires the wisdom to challenge the views of our neighbours. It requires the courage to befriend and stand by the persecuted.



Nina Nathan outside the smallest synagogue in the world in South Wales.

# Inter-faith Activity in Wales

Interfaith activity is alive in Wales and many Friends are active directly or indirectly with it. But I think it's useful to say something about demography in Wales, because it helps to provide a context for that activity. Here are a few statistics for Wales taken from the 2001 census:

79.4% of respondents in Anglesey, in the far north, named themselves Christians, and only 13.6% were of no religion. In the old industrial heartlands of the South, by contrast (in Blaenau region, Gwent) the figure for Christians was still 64.2% but that was the lowest such % for any of the regions. There too 25% said they were of "no religion". Evidently in Wales many still ticked the box for Christianity, if asked, though congregations overall continue to fall.

The dilemma for those involved in interfaith activity in Wales is that those of faiths other than Christianity are concentrated in a very limited number of areas. You won't find enough Hindus on Anglesey to figure as a % in the statistics and only 0.1 or 0.2 % of them in 20 other regions of Wales (but in Cardiff 0.8% of Hindus in the population in 2001). Similarly Jews are not statistically significant enough to figure as a population percentage in 12 Welsh regions, and they are just 0.1% in 9 others. They count as 0.3% in Cardiff. While Sikhs figure as 0 or 0.1% in 21 regions, with 0.3% in Cardiff, Muslims can be found everywhere at least sufficient numbers to get above 0.1%. But to get into whole percentage figures even for Muslims you have to be in the Newport area, (2.5%), in Swansea, (1%), or Cardiff (3.7%).

In the university towns there will tend to be some interfaith interaction organised through student societies, chaplaincy initiatives and so on. My own department in Cardiff is involved in training ecumenically in Chaplaincy Studies, which soon may include an interfaith dimension.

The Wales Assembly has a Liaison Officer for work with faith groups and the Inter-Faith Council for Wales points on its website to 7 areas now listed under the Wales Inter-Faith Network. The Council of Christians and Jews is alive in Wales as elsewhere, though that will be where the numbers of Jews make it most viable, and that

means Cardiff. Where the numbers from faith groups are relatively small and spread widely then their religious communities may feel more vulnerable than confident in their relations with the majority religious group. Indeed in some cases a believer may have little contact with people from his/her own faith tradition, or will have to travel quite some distance to be with them.

Interfaith contact is also (and perhaps now more often) being conducted by Friends apart from designated interfaith groups: through acts of solidarity and friendship between individuals and through Meetings, with ethnic and religious minority groups and through their places of worship. The influx of asylum seekers and refugees to South Wales, in particular, has brought some unexpected interfaith involvements for Friends who have been active in working with and for them.

Ecumenical and interfaith work is a matter of "humanising the other", who potentially might be misunderstood and misrepresented, and with whom we could be working to improve the world. Can Friends look to a more meaningful and deeper interfaith dialogue at local levels, which reaches matters of significance, matters of mutual interest, society-building and political concern? Each side has its 'gatekeepers', i.e. the people in denominations, individual churches, mosques, synagogues etc who determine how much happens, and in what depth. They need to be won over, for both ecumenical and interfaith work. For everyone trust and humble mutual learning are needed to get an honest and undefensive discussion of what links and divides us all in religious terms.

**Christine Trevett**

## Methodist initiatives

The Methodist Church has a number of interesting initiatives, including on interfaith, asylum-seekers and civil liberties. Information can be found at [www.methodist.org.uk](http://www.methodist.org.uk) under 'Open to the World.'

## Editorial

The focus of this edition is on working with, and appreciating 'the other' in interchurch and interfaith to create a better world. I am grateful for the responses to my Editorial last time, and for permission to quote Ireland YM Epistle, all of which remind us that we seek the truth which is beyond all words and concepts, and that 'Love is the first motion.'

## Responses to last CIRcular's Editorial

I have received 2 responses to the editorial asking Friends to suggest ways of talking to those who seek to convert using particular phrases.

Bernard Thatcher writes from Cardiff:

I have been approached by people asking me 'Are you saved?' As a Quaker my answer to that was 'That's up to God not me; I live as best I can; I can do no more.'

'Are you washed in the Blood of the Lamb?' That sounds horrible to me; it smacks of Old Testament practices, and Jesus never spoke of such things.

'Do I know Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour?' To that I would without doubt say yes. If we only followed the teaching of Jesus to 'Love God with all your mind and soul and love our neighbour likewise' we would have peace on earth which we pray for in the Lord's Prayer."

Abigail Maxwell from Newport, Gwent writes:

A born-again Christian in my office sought to bring people to Christ, and picked on me. We had lunch together a few times in a local Christian café, staffed by volunteers, where we could get a rather good baked potato and get out of the office for a bit.

So, she tried to convert me to Christianity and I tried to convert her to Christianity. She did not know what to make of me. She was impressed by my knowledge of the Bible, and yet I was not 'born again' in her sense – eventually she decided I was a Christian, though an immature and deluded one. As for me, I was shocked that she believed in Jonah as a historical figure, who preached to Nineveh. I love that story, but to me it is obviously fictional, and her belief in Jonah

At QCCIR's last meeting in Wales in April, we reflected on the concern of Colchester and Coggleshall MM on religious intolerance and we wish to share our minute with you. We'd like to hear of initiatives taken by local meetings on this issue.

**Linda Pegler**

surprised me more than her belief in Eden as historical. However I gained great respect for her commitment and her desire to do what is right, and even respect for her Christianity, which like mine includes the message 'God is Love.'

I stopped meeting her when I had been off sick with depression, and when I came back she told me I was depressed because my relationship was not right with God. But I did gain greater understanding of her form of Christianity, and a strong feeling that I was glad she was trying to do the right thing in her own way, that she did God's work in part, just as I do God's work in part.

**Produced by the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations, 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ**

**Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations keeps Quakers in Britain informed of movements towards co-operation within the Christian Church and opportunities for interfaith dialogue, and it responds on their behalf to other churches and communities of faith.**

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## **Extracts from the Epistle from Ireland Yearly Meeting held from 12-15 April 2007**

It has been a positive year for the communities on this island, who have come to realise that demands are being made to revise self-perceptions. This much has been achieved and progress is being made towards new modes of co-operation.

A great opportunity opens up before us in Ireland as a Religious Society of Friends, a family of Friends in a creative discourse with this ever-changing world where the mistrust, fear and isolation that have inhibited us in the discourse will fade away under the influence of Divine caring Love. We are learning an inter-dependency as global issues become localized and local issues become globalized.

The Quaker family in Ireland has to come to terms with change. Much as society has fostered isolation and self-containment so has the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland tended to reflect this in theological and social terms. There must be a desire for, and a passionate zeal for truth by Friends on all sides and from different perspectives. We need to be in relation with God and with the challenges offered by different people to us, not merely by 'doing' but by 'waiting'.

Some Friends speak of 'the Blood of the Lamb' and some of 'Holding in the Light' and might find it hard to accept an identity with one or the other expression, but there needs to be a trust that the same kindness, care and love is in the intention implied even when there is no agreement in words or image. If it is not possible to agree we can lovingly disagree but with greater understanding.

We may know abandonment, the winter of godless despair, but we can also know joy unbounded, the summer warmth of God's presence. Our future is to be 'tied in a single garment' of mutuality, of destiny. We cannot be half-involved like the Laodiceans. The half-committed may be more of a hindrance than a help. We must not lead lives that compromise our relationship with our Creator.

## **Talking Wall York 2005**

A booklet has been produced bringing together the original material submitted to the QCCIR Talking Wall at Yearly Meeting in York in 2005. This is a record of the experiences of Friends involved in interchurch and interfaith activities. This is available, price £3.00, incl p&p, from Mary Cook, maryfrechfa@hotmail.com 01633 484154

## **Quakers and the Ecumenical Agenda**

A conference is to be held at Woodbrooke from August 5th-9th 2007 to consider what the faith and order issues are for Quakers in their relationships with other churches. It is expected that Friends from other Yearly Meetings will participate. Further details from Woodbrooke

## **Leaflets**

Leaflets have being prepared by QCCIR and are available on request from the Secretary, Marigold Bentley. These are a) Local Churches Together and Covenants and Constitutions, b) Organising a Quaker meeting for Worship on Ecumenical Occasions, c) Quakers and Ecumenical Occasions: the Eucharist and d) Quakers and encounters with other faiths

## **Speakers**

Members of QCCIR committee are available to talk to meetings on ecumenical and interfaith topics. This can be arranged through Marigold Bentley in QPSW.

**Opinions in articles and letters are those of the writers and do not necessarily represent those of this committee.**

**Any contributions from Friends are welcome.**