

# **Porvoo Communion of Churches**

## **Keys to Inter Faith Engagement**

**The Churches in the Porvoo Communion produced *Guidelines for Inter Faith Encounter* at a conference in Oslo in November-December 2003. These guidelines were further developed at a major Interfaith Engagement Consultation in Gothenburg in March 2011.**

The following **Reflection Sheets** are based on the original guidelines from 2003 as well as the Interfaith Engagement Consultation in 2011. It would be useful to read both the 2003 and 2011 documents which can be found at [www.porvoocommunion.org](http://www.porvoocommunion.org) (then look under 'Resources' and 'General Resources' ).

As Inter Faith work is a crucial area in the fields of 'mission and service' the purpose of the Reflection Sheets is to *enable people to consider the situation where they live and engage locally with their neighbours from different faith/belief communities to support and develop Inter Faith engagement locally.*

The topics to be considered are highlighted on four separate sheets with a fifth sheet being a theological conclusion.

How to use these Reflection Sheets:

- can be read by an individual
- can be read by a group
- can be used with young people
- can be used ecumenically
- can be used as a study course
- can be used during an Inter Faith Week with people of other faiths/beliefs

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**The Porvoo Communion of Churches believes that as Christians they have a calling to engage with Inter Faith work because:**

- We are part of a common humanity. We share life with its happiness and worries, joys and struggles with people of different faiths, and no religion. We are sent by God to share and serve in a common society, as fellow citizens.
- In each person we are called to recognise the image of God. Love for our neighbour has no limits - *There is wideness in God's mercy.*
- Our limited understanding does not give us the full knowledge of God. We therefore need to also understand the experiences of our neighbour for a wider vision of God. Through such encounters we not only learn more of the distinctiveness of our own Christian faith but can be further strengthened to be confident Christians in a pluralistic world.

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### **Reflection Sheet 1**

#### **Engaging with International, European, National and Local Issues**

We know that it is impossible to separate inter faith relations in our own countries from the effect of situations in other countries. International issues may have a very serious impact on minority faith groups, and at times of crisis in particular we should be ready to show solidarity with communities who may be feeling under threat. The situation of vulnerable minorities in other countries will often form a significant theme of dialogue, and our Churches will feel particular bonds of prayer and affection with Christian communities experiencing persecution. We need to make it clear, though, that it is unfair to hold faith communities in our countries to account for the actions of their co-religionists in other parts of the world (Guideline 10.2003).

#### ***1. Clarify the make up (demography) of faith and cultural communities, including new religious movements***

- In the parish and local area
- In the town, city, rural area
- In local schools
- In local and national media and advertisements
- In church/churches/diocese
- In political bodies, councils
- In any other key sectors, such as police, health workers, teachers etc.
- In the local landscape- mosques, temples etc
- Note any recent critical happenings
- Note any new waves of immigration

#### ***2. Establish what the national demography is and the faith Communities present there. Establish whether and from where they are growing***

- New groups entering our country and which faiths
- New restrictions or rule changes

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- New political movements, such as the Far Right. Do the Far Right use ‘Christian’ or ‘national church’ rhetoric to further their cause?
- Growth of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism (examples)
- New atheism

### ***3. In the light of the above is Christian identity and confidence threatened? How?***

The Christian commitment to love our neighbours and to seek justice for all leads us to affirm the importance of religious freedom in every society. Within our own countries, this is safeguarded by the European Convention on Human Rights: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.' (1950). We have a particular concern for the rights of minority communities in our own societies. We recognise the importance of the principle of equal legal protection for all our citizens; it is important that religious authority should not be abused to control or repress vulnerable individuals (Guideline 11.2003).

### ***4. Do you feel ‘European’ as you consider these questions?***

### ***5. Share with the group examples of how international events have affected your local or national context and note the reactions***

Examples include:

- 9/11 and London bombings (7/7)
- Gaza and the Holy Land, Danish Cartoons, Iraq, Libya, the ‘Arab spring’, Afghanistan, Pakistan, death of Osama Bin Laden
- Sri Lankan civil war
- Increasing violent attacks on Christian minorities (Guideline 11.2003 above)

### ***6. The stance of the government or local council (hostile, neutral or positive)***

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- To engaging with faith communities, and issues involving faith and religion?
- Are faith communities seen as enabling community cohesion or not (clear examples)?
- Are faith schools (religious schools) hostile, neutral or positive influences towards cohesion?
- Have there been local or national examples of trying to ban religious symbols and practices, for example, the turban, the Niqab, minarets, crosses? What do you feel about these?

### ***7. Put together any examples of common action in response to natural Disasters and conflict caused by humans and local situations***

- Are there any examples of interaction between local and national inter faith dialogue groups or structures?

### ***8. Discuss the consequences of new communications on faith Communities***

- Facebook, satellite channels and the internet

### ***9. 'A Common Word' is an initiative of 138 Muslim scholars and leaders through a letter addressed to the Pope and Church leaders in 2007***

- Look up the web site dedicated to this ([www.acommonword.com](http://www.acommonword.com)) and also read the responses of church leaders, especially those from the Porvoo Churches.
- Consider also:  
*Generous Love- an Anglican Theology of Inter Faith Relations* (<http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/resources/documents>)
- *The Interfaith Encounter* by The Committee For Relations With People Of Other Faiths & The Doctrine Committee Of The Scottish Episcopal Church. ISBN 0905573714 June 2006  
[www.scotland.anglican.org](http://www.scotland.anglican.org)

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### **Reflection Sheet 2**

#### **Changing Patterns of living**

##### ***1. Discuss the key changes in gender roles (male/female) in your society in recent decades and especially in the new Millennium***

We recognise that in many inter faith situations there is a need to strengthen the presence and active involvement of women (though in some contexts it may be men who are under-represented). Together with people in other faith communities, we should strive to ensure that participation in inter-religious events has a fair gender balance, and to set a positive lead by insisting on this in the case of Christian representation. At the same time, we need to recognise the strength of the cultural and religious factors which may inhibit the participation of women alongside men in inter faith activities. In inter faith dialogue we should be ready to raise issues of women's rights as human rights (Guideline 9.2003).

##### ***2. Key changes in patterns of relationships***

While we rejoice in the new vitality that religious and cultural diversity has brought to many parts of our societies, we are also aware of the confusion and pain that can be felt by long-established communities who find their neighbourhoods transformed. We emphasise the importance of maintaining a vigorous and engaged Christian presence at local level in multi-faith areas. We recognise also the need to be aware of the ethnic and religious discrimination in our societies which affect other faith groups (Guideline 5.2003)

- Discussions on the effect on the Christian community
- Discussions on the effect on other faith communities
- How do we fulfil the legal requirements of living in a secular society, where equal rights are a given, with the various stances of our churches, and faith communities (see also guideline 9.2003 above)?

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### ***3. Mixed marriages and upbringing of mixed faith families***

We need to be sensitive to the hopes and needs of those who are thinking of embarking on marriages across the boundaries of faith. Clergy and others with a ministry of pastoral care should be equipped to provide appropriate advice and support for such couples and for their families. They also need to have access to suitable resources for the nurture and education of children of inter faith couples, and to develop patterns of support for the families of those who have converted to or from other faiths. We sense that there is growing need to share good practice in the pastoral care of those who experience bereavement in inter faith relations (Guideline 7.2003).

- Is there adequate support for mixed faith marriages?
- How is the support base for bringing up of children in mixed faith families?
- Do you know examples, and what are the main issues?
- Discuss ways of providing help and support

### ***4. Additional Questions***

- How do issues concerning cohabitation, civil partnerships and same sex Marriages impact on interreligious dialogue?
- What is your local context?

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### Reflection Sheet 3

#### Building Long Term Trust

Our faith speaks of the centrality of permanent commitment to one another as the way to build stable and trustful relationships. In inter faith encounter, there can be no substitute for the patient, painstaking and time-consuming process of getting to know our neighbours of other faiths, earning their respect, and becoming their friends. We have found that it is within relationships of this kind, built up over many years, that dialogue acquires authenticity, the quest for truth can be honestly pursued, and difficult issues can be addressed (Guideline 1.2003).

#### *1. Stereotypes are a major hindrance to building up long term trust*

- What are your stereotypes of Muslims and Islam? What are those of society around?
- What are your stereotypes of Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jews?
- How do members of other faiths see Christians, Christianity and the church?
- What other hindrances can one name?
- What can one do to counter these difficulties?
- Do you have examples of long term friendships? Describe one such friendship and what you have learnt from each other.
- Do you know of any long term dialogue groups (bilateral or multilateral)?
- Do you have a local Council of Faiths, Inter Faith Council or Faith Leaders' Meeting? Are they successful? What can be done to improve it/them?

#### *2. What can promote honesty and openness without destroying trust?*

*Do you have any examples of 'telling the truth in love' and 'hearing the truth in love?'*

Speaking truthfully requires us to avoid simplistic or homogenising language. Rather, we need to recognise the complexity and diversity of all faith communities, our own included. When we speak of the beliefs and practices of



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others, we must first seek good information and rely on authoritative sources to build up our knowledge, and we must talk about our neighbours in language that will enable them to recognise themselves in our descriptions. This will involve us in an imaginative and sympathetic effort to think ourselves into their situation. It is unfair to compare the ideals in our own religion with the practice of another, or *vice versa*. Christians and members of other communities need to acknowledge that we all face challenges in living by faith in our societies. Even in situations where we strongly disagree with others, we must make an effort to understand their beliefs and practices, to respect the faith which informs them, and to love them as our neighbours. If we feel there are times when we must be critical of others' positions, we cannot avoid the challenge of self-criticism (Guideline 2.2003).

- How do we affirm the principles of human rights, balancing apparent emphases on human autonomy and divine authorisation?

### ***3. Praying and worshipping together or alongside***

We acknowledge that there may be times when Christians would like to come together with people of other faiths in an attitude of prayer and worship before God. This may happen, for example, in the pastoral context of a marriage or funeral, as part of the ongoing life of a group or organisation, or at times of crisis, remembrance or thanksgiving, locally or nationally. As Christians, some of us will welcome occasions like this, while others will find them very difficult; a range of attitudes will also be found among people of other faiths. In whatever way inter faith gatherings for prayer or worship are organised, we think that it is important to be clear about the purposes of the event, to consider carefully what is an appropriate venue, and to ensure that all present can take part in what is planned with integrity and without confusion. Sharing silence can provide a valuable way of expressing our presence together before God, and we are also learning from the experience of being present as honoured guests at one another's times of prayer and worship (Guideline 4.2003).

- Provide examples from your local context.
- Do these increase trust or cause problems?

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### *4. Are there examples of practical interfaith projects to assist those in need on the margins of society at the local or national level, which help to build up trust through acting together?*

We seek co-operation with people in other faith groups on practical projects where this is appropriate and possible. We believe that our Churches have a particular role to play in encouraging our national governments and local authorities to explore and to understand the complexities of faith community organisations. We recognise that people of all faiths have a concern for the whole of society, while at the same time we all need to be honest about the real differences we can experience when we try to interpret in practical terms values which may sound the same when expressed as generalities. We believe that the Churches are called to work with people of other faiths in seeking the welfare of asylum seekers and refugees (Guideline 8.2003).

- Have you been involved?
- Could you be involved and make such a plan?

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### Reflection Sheet 4

#### Sharing our faith

***1. What is the Gospel 'the good news' you would like to share with a Muslim, a Hindu or a Buddhist?***

We are called to share our faith with others in ways that are confident but sensitive. As we do so, we are ready to listen and to learn as well as to speak. We recognise that the intentions of those engaged in dialogue may differ, and it is easy to suspect one another of hidden agendas. We cannot force our beliefs on others, but we should always be ready to witness to our faith by deeds as well as by words. We must never exploit the situation of vulnerable individuals and groups, nor make our service of others conditional on their accepting Christian faith. Within our churches, we recognise that Christians differ among themselves about the relations between interfaith dialogue and evangelism. We think it is important that these differences should be discussed openly and respectfully in the light of our theology and experience (Guideline 3.2003).

- Share Biblical stories or Parables with your neighbour of another faith in a way that could communicate the heart of Christian Faith
- In what way can our brothers and sisters of other faiths be a strength for us in witnessing in a secular society?

***3. Should we encourage people of other faith to become Christians? If yes, then why? If no - why not?***

Where the Spirit is at work, we rejoice that conversions of people to the way of Christ may happen. They must always be the free result of God's interaction with others, not of our own planning or persuasion. We recognise that inter faith encounter is powerful and unpredictable in the transforming effect it can have on people's lives. It may lead to people changing their religious commitment away from as well as towards Christianity. People of different faiths may also feel that inter faith encounter brings them closer to God within the framework of their own religious commitment. As Christians we need to be aware of the difficulties that can be faced by new believers, and our Churches need to be prepared to change themselves in

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order to welcome new members. Some converts can find the whole concept of inter faith dialogue difficult, especially if it involves them in encounter with their previous religion. Other converts may have a valuable personal contribution to make to inter faith understanding, and we think that their place in dialogue should be affirmed.

- If someone is to convert to Christianity, what are the difficulties they may face?
- If a young Christian becomes a Muslim, a Buddhist or a follower of a Hindu movement, what do we feel about that?
- What have you learned from your neighbour of another faith?

#### ***4. How far does your church contribute to teaching about the beliefs and practices of other faiths, and how to relate to them (children, young people and adults)?***

In situations where our Churches are involved in education, we can ensure that children and young people are adequately equipped for life as citizens of religiously plural societies. As part of this, we may need to insist that Christianity is taught with an awareness of its international reach and its cultural diversity within the local situation. Within the church community, teaching needs to be shaped in such a way as to help Christians explore the inter faith implications of their faith. Experiences of educational opportunities can help to give us a proper confidence in our own faith and a generous openness to others.

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### **Reflection Sheet 5**

#### **Our Theological Foundations**

The guidelines include this faith statement:

When we encounter people of other faiths we do so with the strength of God whom we know as Trinity.

#### ***God is no less generous in salvation than in creation***

The God whom we meet in creation is generous in grace and rejoices in diversity ‘O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all!’ (Ps 104.24). This creator God is the same saving God who wishes to lead all to perfection.

#### ***Jesus Christ shows us God’s face and opens the way to God***

In Jesus we have seen ‘the radiance of God’s glory’ (Heb 1.3), he shows us the way to the Father and we wish to share this way with others. Our witness to this way needs to be made in such way that it is heard as god news by all; it is not for us to proclaim limits to God’s saving mercy.

#### ***The Spirit’s presence is known through the Spirit’s fruits***

‘The tree is known by its fruits’, and ‘the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control’ (Mat 12.33; Gal 5.22f)

Through the birth of Jesus Christ, it is evident that God is for ever bound up with human life in its ever changing and diverse contexts. As Christians we share this journey in history, and in today’s world. God’s Mission is for us to work alongside and with people of other faiths in enabling signs of what Christians call the Kingdom of God. At the same time we rejoice in telling the stories of love and hope offered in the Gospel.

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## **Background Information**

### **The Porvoo Communion of Churches and Inter Faith Engagement**

The Porvoo Communion of Churches consists of Anglican Churches (Church of England, Church of Ireland, Scottish Episcopal Church, Church in Wales, Lusitanian Church in Portugal, Spanish Episcopal Reformed Church), five Nordic Lutheran Churches (Church of Sweden, Church of Norway, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark) and two of the Baltic Lutheran churches (Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Lithuania).

The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church and Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church Abroad reunited in November 2010. This reunification has brought in Diaspora congregations into the Porvoo Communion of Churches.

Currently there are also three Churches with observer status in the Porvoo Communion of Churches (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia, the Lutheran Church in Great Britain and the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church Abroad)

The Churches in the Porvoo Communion share some common historical associations since the Reformation. They also share the history of having been national Churches and are constantly responding to new situations.

The Common Statement of these participating churches has been hailed as ‘the single most important ecumenical proposal’ to be discussed in many years.

These churches also understand themselves as having a special responsibility for all people regardless of religion. They believe that their current interfaith engagement and their future work in this field to be a significant resource bringing together their respective strengths for the common good. They see interfaith work as a key in the field of ‘mission and service’.