

## **Some reflections on racism in Ireland**

*Address to Members of CEC (Conference of European Churches) Central Committee meeting in Londonderry, N. Ireland by the Rt Revd Michael Jackson, Bishop of Clogher on May 30<sup>th</sup> 2006*

### **BACKGROUND**

A number of factors combine to bring about the undeniable racism in contemporary Irish society. The first is that, until recently, the people of 'other nationalities' whom Irish people met on home ground were immigrants, usually with a commercial or professional focus, rather than asylum seekers or refugees. (There remains intense confusion about these terms among people on the ground and this leads to misunderstanding of who people are and why they are in Ireland.) This meant that such people rather quickly became assimilated into Irish society by 'earning respect' through their contribution to that society. Heightened international turmoil in the Middle East and in Africa over the last decade, largely through war, displacement and corruption, have forced settled peoples in volatile political regions to become international nomads and economic migrants. Things internal to such countries get no easier. While UNHCR figures place international refugees at 9,000,000, the number of persons displaced in their own countries stands at 25,000,000. All of this has changed the perception of those now entering Ireland.

A second factor is the greater mobility offered by a Europe defined and driven by a free-market economy, particularly with increased accession in 2004 and further accession under negotiation. In an earlier phase of European expansion, the Republic of Ireland qualified for and made good use of structural funding and today, on paper, is one of the strongest economies in Europe. There is, underneath the surface, however, discrimination and exploitation of foreign workers, something of real anxiety to the churches. Thirdly, the 'peace dividend' in Northern Ireland means that significant numbers of people are consciously moving to live in Northern Ireland, particularly from eastern Europe. Those who are 'different' in any way in Northern Ireland can and often do have a very hard time. Shamefully, relaxation in the intensity of overt sectarianism has resulted in deepening racism consisting in attacks on those of other nationalities and ethnicities. Belfast has earned the dubious title of 'Hate Capital of Europe.' We all need to remember that we are all in a very real sense ethnic.

### **DIFFERENT POLICIES**

Different policies have been adopted to enable people entering Ireland as refugees and asylum seekers to start to build new lives in Ireland. In Northern Ireland, people are concentrated in the Greater Belfast area because that is where the facilities are located. In the Republic of Ireland, for a number of years already, there has been a policy of dispersal of people in smaller numbers in villages and country towns. This has made their presence across the whole country more expected and in many ways more accepted. The trend of immigration will continue. The Celtic Tiger hunts for willing workers. Over the next ten years it is predicted that up to 50,000 new workers are required each year for the Republic of Ireland to continue economically as it is. Recent figures document 90,000 new jobs in Ireland in the last year with 50,000 being taken up by people entering Ireland from abroad.

## SOME STATISTICS AND SOME PREDICTIONS

Many of the circumstances in which refugees and asylum seekers live are bad. They see themselves as being guilty until proved innocent. For many the term 'illegal' in the sound-bite phrase 'illegal immigrant' means next to nothing because, practically, they have fled for their lives from one country through many countries eventually to Ireland. Many simply do not want to be here at all. Documentation was the last thing on their mind when last they were at home. The confusion in the terms: immigrant, refugee, asylum seeker contributes to the ingredients of popular misunderstanding. This results in the tangible consequences of active aggression and of an undercurrent of intimidation. Between 2002 and 2005 the average annual growth in the population of the Republic of Ireland was 1.8% with an increase from 3.92 million to 4.13 million in the three-year period. To set this in context, as recently as the years leading up to 1980, Ireland experienced an annual net emigration of 40,000 people. The situation over the last six years, with its vastly increased economic growth, has been one of 58,000 immigrants, with 22,000 emigrants each year. The elective emigrating population of Northern Ireland remains proportionately higher, with a population of almost 1,700,000. Current projections for the Republic of Ireland, using the various indicators, suggest a population in 2030 of 5.5 million, with an average growth rate of 1.2% per annum. The population will, I myself predict, continue to be concentrated in the Greater Dublin area where more than 1,000,000 people now live and where there has been population increase over the past 40 years of 45%-155%. It is expected that the 2006 Census will show the following nationalities in the following numbers: Polish 150,000; Chinese 60,000; Lithuanian 45,000; Latvian 30,000; Nigerian 28,000; UK 25,000; Romanian 5,000; Pilipino 5,000; Pakistani 5,000.

A contributing factor to increased racism is the fear of erosion of Irish identities, particularly in Northern Ireland, and the economic threat felt particularly by those who are unemployed or in low paid work. The findings of a Government Report in 2000 for Northern Ireland underwrite a genuine emotional insularity. That particular report concluded that racism is twice as common as sectarianism and that anti-traveller prejudice features very highly. It also showed a hardening of attitude since 1995, for example a rise from 1/3 to 1/2 of people who would not welcome as Chinese person as a member of their family. But a different agenda was also coming through, namely the need for education. 83% of people polled supported the need for effective equal opportunities and 87% felt that children should be taught in school about the traditions of minority ethnic peoples.

The British Government's consultative document *A Shared Future* (2003) is pivotal to understanding political developments. It is designed to facilitate the implementation of a whole new configuration of social and community life in Northern Ireland. The Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland has come out of its philosophy. It offers a framework designed: to tackle racial inequalities in Northern Ireland; in its own words 'to open opportunities for all'; to eradicate racism and hate crime; together with *A Shared Future* to initiate actions to promote good race relations. There are six specific aims: eliminating racism; equality of protection; equality of service provision; participation; dialogue; capacity building. While fully accepting that these are technical terms, I sometimes think that with this sort of language I must be in Alice's Wonderland or drawing up next Christmas's Santa Claus list. But what I do know is that aspirational lists like this mean nothing without courageous, concerted effort on the part of all concerned. A stable political future in Northern Ireland is the essential backdrop to a climate of tolerance and respect of 'the other,' however defined.

## THE CHURCHES

The background in the churches is sobering. Late in 2002, Dr David Stevens, then General Secretary of ICC, reported on research commissioned by ICC on The Religious Life of Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Immigrants in the Republic of Ireland. There are many warning signs and it forms the backdrop to my outline of the work of AICCMR, the All-Ireland Churches' Consultative Meeting on Racism with which I am associated. Among what we call 'Protestant' churches, there is little interaction between those whom Dr Stevens calls 'host' and 'guest' in this situation. Notable and laudable exceptions exist and are rightly celebrated, but in too many cases cultural differences and different worship styles inhibit interaction and result in people moving away to what they consider more congenial churches, often Black Majority Churches. Why is this? There is the numerical growth but not yet the emotional growth. In a decade, the African community in the Republic, for example, has grown from a few hundred to more than 30,000. Many are Anglican but do not worship in large numbers in the Church of Ireland. The Black Majority Churches are entirely congregational but with an all-Ireland remit. Parochial scruples and diocesan boundaries mean absolutely nothing to this ecclesiology. They seem quicker to react, they are more appealing through their directness and their informality combined, their Biblical teaching is very 'hands on.' The other unavoidable consideration is that the complex histories of Orthodoxy, including the parts of Orthodoxy which have an obedience to Rome, carry their differences, sometimes acute, into Ireland in their hand luggage with them. Considerable efforts have been made to affiliate a wide range of Churches in today's Ireland far beyond what are still called 'The Four Main Churches' into the ICC. The challenge, as Dr Stevens concluded, remains for mainstream Irish churches to create and sustain relationships locally with the new churches. In this climate we in AICCMR began our work.

## AICCMR

This *ad hoc*, entirely amateur, group came into being in 2003 and I have had the privilege to belong to it. The immediate background lies in the work of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) and its Commission for Racial Justice through Arlington Trotman and the late Fee Ching Leong. Fee Ching, a Racial Justice Commissioner, conducted primary research throughout Ireland and her Report reviewed Black and Minority Ethnic Groups living in the Western Area and in Northern Ireland. It documents and analyzes the experiences of people from abroad who had come to Ireland as seekers of asylum and the ways in which they were treated by members of the churches. Our meetings were facilitated by the Irish Council of Churches. Gradually we were recognized as doing work which was not being co-ordinated by the churches in Ireland in any other context or way. Every effort was made to include in our meetings the newer churches and we discovered soon that late morning meetings were a luxury which they could not afford. Many of their pastors work to earn a living during the night and work to shepherd their people during the day.

The Four Church Leaders met with us and endorsed our work in late 2004 – a massive boost to our confidence. We secured, through the Irish Council of Churches and Irish Inter-Church Meeting, funding for a part-time co-ordinator in the person of Scott Bolt. This enabled us to plan a residential All-Ireland Conference in November 2005 entitled: *Challenged by Difference: Threat or Enrichment?* This drew together more than 100 church and community leaders along with people who had come to live in Ireland and who had direct personal experience of racism. The Conference set itself the task of listening and learning from the experience of ethnic minority groups and people who have responded to the challenge of difference; encouraging all Christian

churches to acknowledge racism as a fundamental issue in society which the churches have a significant role in addressing; describing and presenting anti-racist initiatives which various churches have undertaken, developed or supported; creating time and space for people to interact, share ideas and concerns, and to make a commitment to anti-racist work.

The Conference has been followed by Regional Meetings across Ireland enabling the people from each region who attended the Conference to form a local Group and to incorporate into each Group others who might have attended the Conference but were not able to do so. For example, a recent meeting in Galway included people who were from Ireland, Holland, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Scotland, Russia and England.

The Group now works closely with the Irish Council of Churches Committee for Social Issues. It does not attempt to castigate the churches for what they are not doing. It is not a voracious pressure group. It does not pursue advocacy on behalf of individuals. It remains true to its origins of seeking to give authoritative voice within the churches and for the good of the society at large to the vision that the challenge of difference can be, and ought to be, an enrichment when in the face of our neighbour we seek and find the face of Jesus Christ. We have discovered that it is so much easier for the churches to work together ecumenically when there is a focus beyond discussions about ecumenism. In this case 'addressing racism' has proved to be a catalyst in ecumenical activity rather than simply in ecumenical articulation.

## **ECUMENICAL POSSIBILITIES**

Presuming that mobility within Europe at least will accelerate as Europe itself expands; presupposing that Turkey joins the EU at some point in the future, without even considering the peoples from other countries beyond Europe, I think that we who form the European Churches have a major ecumenical difficulty, challenge and opportunity on our hands. Not only in Ireland but across Europe, we are faced with residents, short-term or long-term, who have human and spiritual needs which all too often are pushed underground by what is called 'the economic imperative.' This is a genuine spiritual crisis for human beings made in the image and likeness of God. Some 'host' churches are national churches, some are not the religious establishment of the country in question. Whatever the subtlety, the question cannot be avoided and it is this: What do we mean by those clichés of contemporary church-speak – mission and ministry – if we do not mean reaching out in human friendship, in Christ-like respect and in practical charity to those who, often reluctantly, live in a country which gives off the vibes of being much more 'ours' than it ever will be 'theirs'? I suggest that people like this are little concerned with whether our links with one another are bi-lateral or multi-lateral, official or unofficial. And, whether they are atheist because of the ways in which their society was forced to develop or change out of all recognition, or whether they are members of another world faith or indeed fellow-Christians, we are faced with the question given a practical answer by the despised Samaritan alone: *Who, then, is my neighbour?* And let us never forget that, when it comes down to it, we are *all* ethnic.