

Al Azhar Cairo 2010

The Joint Committee, which is composed of a delegation from the Anglican Communion and from Al Azhar Al Sharif held its eighth annual meeting in Cairo on 27-28 October 2010 corresponding to 19-20 Dhu Al-Qi'da 1431. This was held in accord with the agreement signed at Lambeth Palace on 30 January 2002 by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Grand Imam of Al Azhar.

The Grand Imam His Eminence Dr Ahmed el Tayyib welcomed the Joint Committee in his office and members of the Anglican delegation congratulated upon his accession to the position of the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, presenting him with greetings and congratulations from the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Archbishop also invited Dr el Tayyib to visit Lambeth Palace in London. The Grand Imam has accepted this invitation, the details of which will be agreed at a later time.

The two co-Chairs, Sheikh Ali Abdel Baki Shehata and Bishop Alexander John Malik, opened the meeting. Sheikh Baki noted how recent global developments had made positive engagement and dialogue between Muslims and Christians absolutely vital. It was essential for the good of all humanity. Bishop Malik commented on the importance of dialogue becoming an instrument of hoped-for peace and understanding, and noted the need to take positive steps to help achieve this.

Dr Mahmoud Azab, the consultant of Al Azhar for dialogue, gave a speech in which he announced the foundation of the new centre of dialogue by Al Azhar Al Sharif. This centre will benefit from studying past dialogues with all their positives and negatives but will add a new dimension, enlarging the circle of dialogue with different denominations and religions in east and west alike, including those who wish to dialogue with mutual respect, objectivity, wisdom and sound learning, respecting the religious doctrines of others, and strengthening the relations between Christian and Muslim societies.

The Joint Committee heard and discussed the following papers:

1. Religious Harmony: Is it possible to achieve (Bishop Mouneer H Anis)
2. For the Common Good: The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Church of England and Christian-Muslim Relations (Mrs Clare Amos)
3. 'Yes' for peace and co-existence, 'No' for hatred and conflict (Dr Muhammad El Shahat El Gindi)
4. Justice and Equality (Sheikh Ali Abdel Baki Shehata)

In addition the meeting listened to a review of the Anglican-Al Azhar dialogue 2002-2009 given by Revd Rana Khan.

This year's papers focused especially on the importance of religious leaders using their influence to play a constructive role in ensuring religious harmony, particularly in countries where there is religious diversity. Bishop Mouneer Anis reviewed the religious situation in Egypt and Singapore. He drew attention to some examples of inter-communal violence in Egypt, and analysed the causes of these incidents in the

context of the wider Middle East. Bishop Mouneer referred to the experience of Singapore, an Asian country with a diverse religious demography which has successfully fostered both religious tolerance and full citizenship. Mrs Clare Amos spoke about the relationships between Christians and Muslims in England, and the pivotal role of the Church of England in this particular context. She pointed out the positive role played by the current Archbishop of Canterbury in seeking to enable adherents of all religions to contribute 'to the common good' of the nation. Dr El Gindi noted the common goals of Christianity and Islam and highlighted the importance of religions demonstrating their positive commitment to peace, both for the well-being of all people and because otherwise religion often seemed to be discredited in the eyes of non-religious people. Sheikh Ali Abdel Baki noted how within Islam forgiveness was considered preferable to revenge, and reflected that justice and tolerance were considered two bases within Islam, and important pathways to peace.

Both Dr El Gindi and Bishop Mouneer Anis spoke of the special importance of ensuring that Christian and Muslim young people were educated in ways which encourage them to treat other religions, and their followers, with respect. The need for mutual respect in relation to the doctrines and sacred texts of each other's religion was highlighted.

Those in attendance at the meeting also discussed how essential it was to ensure the welfare of all religious minorities in the world and their right to freedom of religion and freedom of worship.

In his review of the dialogue to date Revd Rana Khan commented on the ground-breaking nature of the dialogue since its inception in 2002, and noted ways that might help to make the dialogue more effective. The importance of ongoing engagement between the annual dialogue meetings was stressed. This engagement might take a variety of forms: study exchanges and meetings between Christian and Muslim scholars and students, projects linked to social and economic development work, particularly in Egypt, and the possible establishment of a sub-committee to discuss matters of mutual interest between annual meetings. It was agreed to establish such a local group in Cairo to concentrate on issues of peace and the acceptance of the other, and the need in education and the media for respect of each other's doctrines, in order to show the civilised face of religion and to encourage a spirit of cooperation and remove causes of conflict and violence.

The members of the Joint Committee agreed to keep channels of communication open throughout the year between the two sides of the dialogue and to encourage additional ad hoc meetings in order to address any urgent issues which might arise.

We offered particular thanks to Revd Dr Samy Fawzy and Sheikh Muhammad Gemi'a who had translated for the meeting.

We agreed that the Joint Committee should meet again in autumn 2011 in London.

Signed

Rt Revd Alexander Malik,
Bishop of Lahore, Pakistan

The Most Revd Dr. Mouneer H Anis -,
Bishop of Egypt
President Bishop of the Episcopal Church
in Jerusalem and the Middle East.

Dr Yvonne Haddad, Professor of the
History of Islam and Christian-Muslim
Relations,
Georgetown University, USA

Mrs Clare Amos, Director of Theological
Studies, Anglican Communion

Revd Rana Khan, International Interfaith
Dialogues Assistant, Lambeth Palace
and Anglican Communion Office

Sheikh Abd El Aziz Wasel
Deputy of the Grand Imam

Sheikh Ali Abd El Baki
President of the Islamic Research Institute

Dr Omar El Deeb, Ex Deputy of the Grand
imam,
Member of Islamic Research Institute

Dr Muhammad El Shahat El Gindi

Professor Dr Mahmoud Azab, Consultant
of Grand Imam for Dialogue and head of
Centre for Dialogue

Dr Taha Abo Kresha, Ex Vice President,
Member of Islamic Research Institute