

Conference Report of the Society for Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling, Dusseldorf, October 2005

Report by Rev. Lorna Murray

The SIPCC (Society for Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling / Gesellschaft fuer interkulturelle Seelsorge und Beratung) held its 18th international seminar in Dusseldorf, Germany, during the first week of October 2005. The theme for this year, the 10th anniversary of SIPCC, was 'Intercultural and interfaith communication.'

The conference opened with a concert of mainly Jewish music, held in the church adjacent to the conference venue. The centre still maintains the residence for deaconesses who, inspired by Friedrich Fliegener in the earlier part of the 19th century, have had long involvement in social care in the name of the church.

The next day, after celebrating harvest festival in the local church, and hearing more about the pioneering work of Fliegener and his wife Friederike, we began the formal part of the conference by hearing about life in the multicultural and multifaith city of Dusseldorf.

On following days, a particular aspect of the topic was focussed on: 'intercultural competence', 'interfaith communication' and 'new perspectives for pastoral care and counselling.'

Depending on which groups we were in, or which workshops we chose to attend, the two topics which aroused most discussion, and a degree of confrontation, were the themes of competence and of interfaith dialogue.

In discussion about interfaith issues, as the only person present from the UK as a whole, I felt myself on several occasions to be 'streets ahead' of the others. The workshop led by a Turkish Muslim on the theme of 'Principles of Islamic care in hospitals' was particularly disappointing because so many of the questions raised were requests for information about Islam rather than, as I had hoped, about how the Muslim community in Germany is providing care to its members. When given the opportunity to ask about care of those with psychiatric problems, the speaker responded that such care did not form a part of his talk. When I pushed further, the reply he gave was that those who are mentally ill would never be made to feel guilty about being ill; but that, since they are not responsible for their actions, there is no need for them to be visited or offered support.

The interfaith focus for the Germans at the seminar was, as to be expected, on dialogue with Muslims from Turkey. Participants from Eastern Europe were, in general, reluctant to discuss interfaith issues. They were, again as might be expected, more concerned with how to develop Christian pastoral care, and Protestant pastoral care in particular. They also felt the need to tell the rest of us more about their troubled political history, and about the difficult relationship of the church with other faiths in times past. They were conscious of their part of Europe having been perceived - and used politically - as a 'buffer zone' between the Christian west and Islam to the east: a history which puts a very different perspective on 'interfaith relations' to the perspective in the west.

The theme of 'competence' produced more stimulating discussion, as well as heated debate, in the groups I attended. Use of the word 'competence' itself was challenged by some members of our group as being 'typically German' - a criticism strongly denied by the Germans present.

Some in our group felt that the search for 'competence', or learning 'competency skills' is an essential part of being able to offer pastoral care and counselling within a multicultural or multifaith community. Potential basic and essential 'competencies' were considered, while the rest of us challenged this approach, by offering such alternative priorities as 'relating' or 'friendship', and the more traditional 'being there' of pastoral care, whether interfaith or not.

By the end of the last day, on the theme of 'new perspectives and challenges', we had come to no firm conclusions, but workshop leaders had offered interesting perspectives on pastoral care within their own local situations. Joseph George, Professor in the Dept of Christian Ministry at the United Theological College, Bangalore, India, conducted the workshop I attended, and led a challenging discussion on the relationship between pastoral counselling of individuals and the pastoral care required by those needing social and political support within the various religious communities of South India.

The conference as a whole was an enjoyable and stimulating experience, with opportunities to discuss familiar issues with people living and working in a wide range of situations and cultures.

There is, I feel, however, a need for the SIPCC seminars to become more intercultural, and to develop their interfaith perspective. The emphasis, despite the name of the organisation, is heavily Christian - and Protestant Christian in particular. They do give, nevertheless, the opportunity to 'widen horizons' and to discuss issues related to pastoral care and counselling in a friendly and 'safe' environment.

As the only member present from across the North Sea this year, I was elected at the SIPCC AGM to be the regional representative for Britain and Ireland. So if anyone reading this would like to know more about SIPCC, or has any suggestions about future themes, then do please contact me by email.

Dates for next year's conference are 17 to 22 September 2006. It will be held in the Academy of Mission, Hamburg University (an innovative and ecumenical dept of mission). The theme, in outline, has already been confirmed as 'the relationship between mission in the 21st century and new ways in pastoral care and counselling'. At this stage, ideas for specific topics within the broad heading, or suggestions for speakers, would be much appreciated, so do please contact me with ideas or suggestions.

Information about seminars, and other aspects of the work of SIPCC can be found, in English as well as in German, on its web site www.sipcc.org

Other useful web sites in relation to pastoral care and counselling are those of the Scottish Association for Pastoral Care and Counselling (www.sapcc.org.uk) and of the International Council for Pastoral Care and Counselling, whose next Congress will take place in Hungary in August 2007 (www.icpcc.net).

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Ed: I include a poignant observation offered by Lorna when she sent in her report, pinpointing an irony that must strike many of us each year. She wrote, 'Pre-Christmas frantic is nearly upon us - this strange mix in chaplaincy of trying to celebrate something of the *hope* of Christmas alongside working alongside those feeling worse *because* of it!'