

Releasing the Energy and Resources of Europe's Plural Communities
Report of a Project supported by DG EAC of the European Commission
Christendom Trust and Churches Commission on Mission

Introduction

There are a number of negative signs in Europe suggesting that there is still difficulty accepting the reality of a plural community where people of different cultures, languages and religions can live and work together.

1. Resurgence of Racism. Throughout Europe there are signs of a resurgence of racism provoked by the increasing numbers of asylum seekers who are attempting to enter Europe.
2. War against Terror. The September 11th atrocities have tended to demonise Islam as the cause of such attacks and innocent Muslims in Europe have experienced increased harassment.
3. Loss of identity. Many of the peoples of Europe whose culture, language and religion are different from that of the majority feel threatened and isolated.

However there are also some very positive signs of plural communities working together to overcome the difficulties and celebrate the richness of diversity.

1. Religion becomes more tolerant. The Chief Rabbi of Britain, Jonathan Sacks has written that:

The great faiths must now become an active force for peace and the justice and compassion on which peace ultimately depends. That will require great courage, and perhaps something more than courage: a candid admission that each faith needs to search for a way of living with, and acknowledging the integrity of, those who are not of their faith. Can we make space for difference? Can we hear the voice of God in a culture that is not our own? Religion is no longer marginal to international politics. After a long period of eclipse, it has re-emerged with immense and sometimes destructive force..... If religion is not part of the solution, it will certainly be part of the problem.

2. Enterprise can increase. Many communities in Britain would be without local shops if it were not for the enterprise of those from the South Asian community. The different skills of different communities can generate new economic activity.
3. Community values are strengthened. The individualism of western culture is challenged by the greater community values of those of other cultures. There is a greater debate about the values upon which the new Europe should be built.

Grassroots has been concerned about these issues for some time and has been actively at work in Luton in partnership with the Luton Council of Faiths. The first European Plural Community Consultation was held in Luton in March 1999 after a Luton plural community had attended the second European Ecumenical Assembly in Graz in 1977. It took some time to raise the funds to organize a second gathering but the work has continued locally. Small groups of plural communities throughout Europe are struggling with these issues – both positive and negative. Throughout the last twelve

months they have been working locally on issues identified by the planning group and in October they came together in a Consultation in Brussels to share their experiences and bring their concerns to the attention of the European Parliament through a Hearing.

Context

Needs

1. **Sense of Powerlessness.** With the expansion of the European Union there has been a growth in the sense of powerlessness felt by many citizens in Europe. There has been the feeling that decisions have been removed from national governments to a faceless bureaucracy in Brussels which ordinary citizens have little hope of influencing. The voter turnout for European elections in countries where it is not mandatory has declined to derisory levels in some voting stations. The Commission has recognised the need and is engaged in an extensive debate about the nature of governance. Just after the October Consultation the people of Ireland were invited to vote again in a Referendum on the Nice Treaty having rejected it at the first time of asking.
2. **Fear of Difference.** Because of the speed of change there is increased insecurity as many of the institutions and activities which had provided stability are struggling to adapt to the changed situation. In this context everything that is different is seen as a threat and part of the cause for the changes. This has been expressed in growth in fascist right wing political movements. The tensions could increase with enlargement and the Commission is anxious to find ways of changing attitudes so that there is greater social cohesion. There has been increased controversy over 'asylum seekers' and 'illegal immigrants' which is fuelling protest and prejudice. This prejudice has been reinforced because of the link between the threat of terrorism and Muslim extremists. During the weekend of the Consultation Bali was the scene of another devastating terrorist attack.
3. **Loss of Identity.** The culture and values that have defined European society for many years are no longer clearly recognisable. Indian dishes are now more popular than fish and chips in Britain. There is resistance to the MacDonaldis culture of individualism and consumerism that is being promoted but no clear idea what alternatives are possible. The different cultural and faith values are seen as threats rather than as opportunities to deepen the spiritual experience of Europeans. The Consultation weekend coincided with national elections in Serbia which produced a swing to the nationalist parties. Many in Europe see their identity in terms of the nationalist symbols of the past and are uncomfortable with a European, plural identity.

Response

1. **Strengthening Civil Society.** Grassroots has been active in rebuilding community infrastructure in the various projects with which it is involved. Individuals need structures through which they can act and many of the existing structures are preoccupied with their own survival. Through its European links in the Kairos network it will support the development of local and regional networks which will actively promote debate about European issues and engage with decision makers.

2. **Affirming Cultural Difference.** Grassroots is a multicultural team working in a multi cultural and multi faith community in Britain. It has brought people of different faiths together to build mutual understanding and more effectively respond to the challenges in the community. It recognises the enrichment and stimulation of cross cultural encounters. There have been requests that this experience should be shared more widely.
3. **Clarifying Values.** People are not just consumers – they have souls which search for answers to the larger questions in life. The joint exploration of values and identity can be a liberating and affirming experience. Grassroots has been involved in this process with the different communities in Luton and has been encouraged to widen this process to the European level.

Aims

1. To bring together the experience of five different centres in Europe of building plural communities
2. To engage with debates in the Commission about governance and the European Charter of Fundamental Rights.
3. To reflect on the values and ethics of a plural Europe
4. To clarify understandings of identity which incorporate the new plural reality of Europe.
5. To strengthen the network so that it has the confidence and competence to follow up the issues locally

Partners

1. Kairos Wallonie – Brussels

Part of the Kairos Europa network and active with many of the minority community groups in Brussels. Has been active in addressing the global financial inequalities that are one of the underlying causes of the tension and conflict between different communities.

2. Kairos Jeunesse – Brussels

This is a youth network based in Brussels but drawing young people from different parts of Europe. It has been active in working with young people in areas of conflict like the Balkans.

3. Society of Citizens Assisting Migrants, Brno, Czech Republic

A group that has been active in work with migrants in the Czech Republic and provides assistance on legal and humanitarian matters.

4. Hinbun, Berlin

A well established community based project providing support for Kurdish women in Berlin. Provides health, education and counseling services. Also involved in relations between the host community and the immigrant community.

5. Community Co-operative and Aisling Arann, Inis Mor, Ireland

The Cooperative coordinates much of the economic development activities on Inis Mor. Aisling Arann is a centre for Celtic culture and spirituality. The groups have been concerned about the survival of indigenous cultures in Europe.

6. Malmo Interfaith Group, Sweden

A small group which has been active in helping the Swedish community to adjust to the presence of increasing numbers of people of different cultures and faiths.

7. Luton Council of Faiths/Grassroots, UK

The two organisations have been active in interfaith and community development work for the last ten years. The Council of Faiths has established good relations with the Local Authority which values its work and contributes an annual grant.

8. Birmingham Community Groups, UK

Representatives of a number of community initiatives were involved in the project. Activities involve participation in regeneration, civic events in the City, small community initiatives to build understanding.

9. Leicester Council of Faiths, UK

One of the oldest established Council of Faiths in Britain which began with an initiative from the Lord Mayor of Leicester in 1986. Now involved in City and Council events, Faith and Health Forum, Work with NHS Trusts, Education and many other activities in the city.

Activities

1. December 2001 Planning Meeting

A small group met in Brussels from 9th to 11th of December to discuss the draft proposal and agree plans for the year. The plans were affirmed and the Consultation was planned for October 2002.

2. January – October 2002 Local Activities

i) Kairos Wallonie

Organised a seminar which explored the socio economic aspects of poverty and marginalisation and examined how the different multi-cultural and multi faith groups might be more actively involved in the work for justice.

ii) Kairos Jeunesse

Organised a seminar for young people in the Balkans.

iii) Community Cooperative/Aisling Arann

Organised a meeting on the island to consider the consequences of increasing migration onto the Island. The meeting drew people from many parts of Europe who are presently living on the Island and generated a very lively discussion about the needs and concerns of both incomers and the indigenous community.

iv) Sweden

Support of the touring exhibition, 'God has 99 names' during its visit to Malmo. The value of this exhibition as a learning experience for those who visited and those who helped as guides was attributed to its ability to arouse interest without fear.

v) Luton Council of Faiths/Grassroots

The Council of Faiths has been active in work with Sikh, Hindu and Muslim communities when tension increased as a result of activities in Kashmir and Gujerat.

Grassroots organised an Indian Cultural evening which was attended by over 100 people and demonstrated the need for more opportunities for people to cross the faith and cultural barriers.

vi) Leicester Council of Faiths

Offered a four hour course providing an Overview of the Faith Communities of Leicester which has been presented five times to various groups including Business and community groups.

4. Consultation in Brussels October 12th to 16th

Sat Oct 12th Arrival in Brussels

Sun Oct 13th am Briefing Who are we?
Why are we here?
What will we do?
What will we achieve?

Pm Joint Meeting with the Kairos Europa Global Financial Programme

Mon Oct 14th am Preparation for Hearing

Pm Hearing with MEPs and representatives of the Commission

- Welcome and Introductions – Eryl McNally MEP
- The Socio Economic Challenges for Europe
- Strengthening Civil Society
- Clarifying Values
- The War on Terrorism
- Affirming Cultural Difference

Tues Oct 15th am Reflections on Hearing
Dream Time – planning in area groups
Steering Group
Closing

Wed Oct 16th Departure

Outcomes

1. Web Site. http://www.grassrootsluton.org.uk/html/plural_communities.html

This site has been established and several pages are devoted to the Plural Community work. This is already being well used and is providing a forum for the different plural community groups to share their experiences. This will be an important means of sustaining and expanding the network.

2. Strengthening Civil Society

The groups that participated in the Consultation were unanimous in their praise for the experience. For many it was the first time to visit the European Commission and to meet their Euro MPs. The opportunity to meet with other groups and learn from their experience has been very important. Each group has plans for work that will develop as a result of the Consultation:

i) Kairos Wallonie

Will continue its work with the minority communities and explore ways in which they can be more involved in campaigning for a more just economic situation

ii) Kairos Jeunesse

Will continue its work in the Balkans with young people being encouraged to become more active in the political process. Training events will be held in Budapest to increase the skills and knowledge of members. There are plans to hold a conference in Albania to build links between the EU countries and those who will remain outside the Union. It is hoped that the Consultation will create interest among more young people who will want to join Kairos Jeunesse.

iii) Hinbun, Berlin

A report will be prepared in German on the Brussels meeting and this will be circulated in Germany. The monthly round table meeting will be used to follow up links with partners. Those who have not participated in Brussels will be encouraged to explore a similar experience through discussions with those who attended. A letter will be sent to German MEPs expressing disappointment that they were unable to attend the Hearing and urging them to take up the issues.

iv) Community Cooperative and Aisling Arann, Ireland

Recognise the importance of networking. Will report back to sending group and send a letter of thanks to the MEP who attended the Hearing. They will explore possibilities of incomers contributing to the schools on the Island so that children have the chance to meet those from other parts of the world. It is hoped that other participants in the Consultation will be able to visit Inis Mor.

v) Malmo Interfaith Group, Sweden

Need to follow up contact with MEPs and see how they can work together in the future. Hope to invite representatives from Finland and Luton, UK to share experiences in Sweden

vi) Luton Council of Faiths/Grassroots

Share the learning from this Consultation among the constituencies of the Council of Faiths and Grassroots. Build closer links with Leicester Council of Faiths. Explore the possibilities of an exchange with Sweden

vii) Birmingham Community Groups

Contact the MEPs and find ways in which they can work together. Report back to local groups. Organise a meeting for Leicester/Birmingham/Wolverhampton Interfaith groups to meet. Organise another Kairos day in Birmingham. Explore ways in which the concerns of the Consultation can be integrated in the Health Agenda 21 projects now being planned.

viii) Leicester Council of Faiths

Follow up links with MEPs. Explore the possibilities of a visit from Hinbun and Inis Mor to Leicester. Use the Womens Day Celebration in Leicester to share outcomes of the Consultation with a wider group. Consider ways in which young people might be

more actively involved. Consider how to become more actively involved in social action.

ix) **Greater Awareness of the Positive Dimensions of the European Community**
Participants were involved in a steep learning curve about the European Community. Some were amazed at the breadth of vision and glimpsed the potential in the Consultation. The participants have direct links with over 2,000 people and indirect links with over 10,000. Europe has become a reality that has been experienced, rather than something that is complained about in the media. The debate about the role of Civil Society and the Future of Europe is no longer academic but relevant.

x) **The Plural Community Network**
The participants welcomed the bilateral and trilateral links that have been made. They affirmed the value of the consultation for the local work. However there was also the recognition that this work needs to be developed if it is to really make a contribution to the New Europe. It is hoped that some means will be found to establish a small coordinating office so that the energy generated in Brussels will be sustained and multiplied.

There are also activities that can be developed on a regional basis and four areas have been suggested:

- the development of lifelong learning projects which draw on the resources of the different faith communities
- the participation of faith communities in the task of development awareness so that the people of Europe become better informed about the need for poverty reduction in the countries of the South
- the strengthening of the capacity of faith communities to engage in Civil Society and ensure that their views are heard by decision makers.
- The exploration of ways in which the spirituality of the different faith communities can contribute to the soul of Europe.

Reflections

1. Balancing the local and the global

This was the first time most of the participants had engaged with European issues and European decision makers. The local concerns take up the time and energy of community groups and it is sometimes difficult to see the significance of regional work. There was some reluctance on behalf of some groups to become involved in the project. After the event all were enthusiastic about the value of such a network and the willingness of Euro MEPs to listen and enter the debate. There is the need for funding to support some coordination activities so that this work can continue. This is part of a process not a one off project.

2. Utilising the public spaces.

It is easy to be critical of the European Union but it will have an increasingly significant role for the citizens of Europe and for the world and so it is vitally important that citizens use all opportunities to engage with the political process. The Commission and the Euro MPs are paid for by the taxes of the people of Europe. They have no credibility unless they represent the people of Europe. They can only represent our views if they hear what we have to say. There are spaces which can be

used for this discussion and the Convention on the Future of Europe is giving a high priority to the need for better contact between the Commission and Civil Society.

3. The Energy of Diversity

The 90 people who were involved directly in this project came from 14 European countries and 16 countries outside Europe. They belong to many different cultures and faiths – Bahai, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian. The diversity of the group drew comments from the places where we were staying, from people in the streets, and from the Commission. It was a group that had not met before and within which there was considerable difference. The dynamics in the group were amazing and there can be very few Hearings which include, poems, songs and dance! Each person brought riches to the gathering and everyone was enriched by the diversity. Plural Communities on this occasion were not a problem to be discussed but a resource to be celebrated. This has given everyone the encouragement to return to their home communities and affirm the value of cultural difference.

4. Touching the Soul

The fact that this was a gathering of people for whom the faith dimension of life is relevant could have been disastrous. There are plenty of examples of differences within a faith community becoming divisive, let alone between communities and faiths. The potential for division and conflict was huge. The fact that this did not happen was due in part to the fact that the spiritual dimension was taken seriously. Very quickly participants were relating to each other at a deep level which involves heart, mind and spirit – the soul level. At this level it is possible to touch a common humanity that is far greater than the differences between us. The presence of a significant Kurdish group in the Consultation was very helpful in this process. The Western European tradition of academic debate and argument had to accommodate the pain and suffering of the women of Hinbun. These are the values that the Consultation wish to affirm as a basis for the new Plural Europe. They enabled the rest of the participants to reconnect with their hearts and spirits so that ninety people left the Consultation better than when they arrived because they had become more human.