



by Simon Forrester

D i a l o g u e
D i a l o g u e
D i a l o g u e
D i a l o g u e
D i a l o g u e
D i a l o g u e
D i a l o g u e

Putting Faith in Dialogue

**“When I put Faith in Dialogue,
my identity no longer remains a monologue”.**

This refrain may sound like George Michael going back to his Wham! rap days, but it isn't. It was actually dreamt up during an exercise by a group participating in a recent training course on 'Faith & Dialogue'.

The course was part of a number of learning activities being run this year through the SALTO Resource Centres on a theme looking forward to the 2008 European Year of Inter-Cultural Dialogue. This particular event involved a group of youth workers and activists from 11 countries across Europe, gathered for a week at a venue in Northern Ireland. There was no sign of George Michael, but down the road in a concert venue in Belfast, there was the distraction of Justin Timberlake performing! Another related course, exploring the theme of Inter-Religious Dialogue, will take place in Istanbul, in Turkey, late in 2007; we'll wait to see which pop stars show an interest in that !

The main driving force in the design of the course was that it was going to explore participants' understandings of 'faith', looking at it from the broadest possible perspective, and thus it was not focussed on institutionalised religion or religious doctrines. Because of this, there was no content that looked per se at the historical development of religion in the European context nor at the existing beliefs and doctrines presented in the Community today. This is what differentiates it from the Istanbul course.

Secondly, the course aimed at helping participants to see how faith shapes identity and how that in turn influences how we might dialogue. Thus, the flow of the sessions was designed to take participants from a very personal perspective of faith

through to situations where 'the personal' meets 'the public' in areas of dialogue. Considerable time was also spent looking at how space for dialogue might be widened and how to prepare for dialogue. Through this flow, the training team were able to introduce a range of tools and exercises that the participants may later use in their own practice. There was also some emphasis on trying to illustrate the theme of the training with the particular local experience and practice in Northern Ireland.



This article is not going to attempt to define what might be meant by 'faith' or 'dialogue', nor to prescribe how such definitions might be agreed, but rather tries to capture some of the experiences of faith and dialogue shared during the course.

Throughout the training both the training team and participants often compared the content of sessions to the metaphor of taking a journey. This was also reflected in the project visits organised around the locality on Day 4 of the training. At The Corrymeela Centre - a centre for peace and reconciliation housed in a collection of beautiful buildings on the stunning Northern Ireland coastline - one of the Social Workers told participants that "we are facilitating dialogue by 'walking along with people'. It's a little like taking a journey through someone else's life".



► Mapping the concepts of Faith, Identity & Dialogue

The first part of the training journey for the participants was an exploration of the key concepts of 'faith', 'identity' and 'dialogue'. On Day 1 participants began to describe their personal understanding of 'faith' by compiling Faith Biographies in pairs. This was a simple and productive exercise whereby participants interviewed each other, asking 'what 3 words describe your faith? What were the key 'faith' experiences in your childhood, teens, 20s 30s and now? How would you complete the sentence "I believe that..."?'

With the Faith Biographies pinned up on the walls, participants next attempted a collective exercise to produce a Dictionary of Faith. This was to be an A to Z of words and expressions that participants associated with the concept of 'faith'. Small groups tackled different parts of the alphabet and a plenary session then brought all the parts together. Some parts of the A to Z came out predictably - G was for God, Glory and Guide; H for Hope, Holy, and Heart - whereas for some letters participants threw up some interesting associations - E was for Equality, N for Nature, O for Opportunity, and S for Saoirse (meaning 'freedom' in Irish) and Tuomiokorkko under T (the Finnish word for 'cathedral'). And if you're wondering, Z was for Zeus and X was for'erm, we'll have to think a bit more about that one' !

For the next part of the journey the trainers guided participants through an exploration of 'identity'. Of course this process had actually begun with the production of the Faith Biographies, but before unpacking identities further there was a brief input on what might be understood by 'identity' and how

it might be analysed. How much more is there to our personal identities than the data that appears on our ID Cards? Do we have single or multiple identities? What can we learn about that part of our identity that derives from our 'faith'? How much can a sociological, psychological or philosophical approach to the analysis inform us?

No matter what theoretical framework or tools for analysis might be used to uncover the make-up of identity, participants on the course understood that some process of 'uncovering' must take place. "When we look at this question from the perspective of a Youth Worker it's useful to remember that identity is formed by a challenging process : we all have an ongoing 'inner dialogue'", remarked one of the participants. To help look at this inner dialogue before linking to any process of public dialogue, participants spent a large part of Day 2 creating very personal 'mandalas'; a concentric visual image capturing the significant moments in the participants' lives influencing the shape of their gender identity, national identity, ethical identity, and faith identity. Mandala is a Sanskrit term - literally meaning 'circle' or 'completion' - used to refer to various objects. It is of Hindu origin, but is also used in other Dharmic religions, such as Buddhism. In practice, mandala has become a generic term for any plan, chart or geometric pattern that represents the cosmos metaphysically or symbolically, a microcosm of the universe from the human perspective. Having completed their 'mandalas' as individual, very personal pieces of work, participants then worked in small groups to focus on the impact of their 'faith identity' on 3 key aspects of daily life: The Family; Work; and Leisure time. Thus, the training journey moved on to the part where the 'personal' meets the 'public'. Participants were getting ready to dialogue.



► Understanding ‘why dialogue?’

Training on dialogue has to be one of the most challenging, but enjoyable experiences. On the Belfast course the trainers approached the objective by helping participants through this particular section of their journey by firstly comparing the concepts of dialogue, communication and discussion. Then looking at what form dialogue may take and what purpose it may have, and lastly exploring how you might prepare for and actually begin dialogue. The essence of these sessions, made up largely of small group discussions and plenary feedback, was well summed up by one of the participants :

“...I do not see any need for dialogue to have a defined purpose. It is a process-orientated activity”.

In the setting of Northern Ireland, the venue for the training, this sentiment was very much echoed in a group presentation on the ‘constraints to dialogue’. One of the group members, a youth worker from Belfast, reflected on his own experience that there was a continued need to motivate for dialogue :

“In Belfast the younger generation is now growing up in a more stable, calm environment and therefore members of the different communities do not any longer understand the importance of maintaining dialogue. For them the job has already been done. But for me it is essential for continued peace for there to be continued dialogue.”

► Preparing for Dialogue

So, how do you motivate and prepare for dialogue? The training team presented one approach to this taken from David Bohm (an American born quantum physicist, who also made significant contributions in the fields of philosophy and neuropsychology). Bohm likened discussion to an activity where we throw our opinions back and forth in an attempt to convince each other of the rightness of a particular point of view. In this process, the whole view is often fragmented and shattered into many pieces. This is in sharp contrast to Bohm’s view of Dialogue, which he saw as being something that moves beyond any one individual’s understanding, to make explicit the implicit and build collective meaning and community. Bohm suggested that there were 4 essential skill areas that needed to be woven together in order to facilitate genuine dialogue:

- Suspension of judgement
- Assumptions have to be identified and named
- Listening to diverse perspectives
- Inquiry and reflection - this is about learning how to ask questions with the intention of gaining additional insight and perspective



With these prerequisites in mind the participants were invited to a session fondly entitled ‘Village People’. This was not an invitation to disco, but to a prepared space where participants were asked to imagine themselves gathering under a large tree in the centre of a village. Participants could start the dialogue in any way that they liked, but the reason given for the dialogue was itself to explore ‘the need for dialogue in the frame of faith-based youth work’. With these instructions given, the trainers left the space and left the village people to dialogue.

The dialoguing practice lasted for around 45 minutes. Of course, just a beginning in dialogue terms, but a useful exercise that clearly illustrated to participants how much investment was needed in order to make dialogue work. It also again stimulated participants and trainers alike to express their different views on what ‘dialogue’ is and how it might be perceived. In the plenary wrap up to the Village People session one of the participants commented that the exercise was rather confusing and that it didn’t promote dialogue.

The Trainer leading the session therefore highlighted how important it is to actually have dialogue about how to run a dialogue process!

Another participant noted that “dialogue has to be well informed and we didn’t have enough knowledge to make the dialogue work”. And yet another described the learning experience as being so demanding ‘that I wanted to run away’. Demanding in that the exercise was both a little surreal and not easy for a group that had formed just 3 days earlier.

Thankfully the participants didn’t run away, instead they spent a day visiting projects and people engaged in

promoting dialogue between the communities in Northern Ireland. This was an excellent opportunity to see theory being put into practice and being out of the training venue was a refreshing catalyst for the remaining sessions on the course.

► Tools & Resources to Support Journeys into Dialogue

The final two days of the training journey were devoted to embedding the skills and knowledge that may assist in preparing for dialogue, and to looking at the practicalities of succeeding in ‘next practice’ - applying the learning.

One part of this leg of the journey took participants into the Inter-Faith Kitchen. This session asked participants to describe how such a ‘kitchen’ might look, bearing in mind all the essence of creating a safe and conducive space for dialogue, as well as what might be the tools and ingredients for cooking up dialogue. Participants were grouped for this work according, broadly speaking, to the composition of the target group of their own youth work: faith-based; non faith-based;

and targets with no single identity. In this way participants were able to describe 'kitchens' and give 'top tips for dialogue preparation' that may apply to these different target youth groups. In one of the working groups participants moved beyond the image of a 'kitchen' and described their ideal space for dialogue as being "the Land of Safe Place. It sounds amazing! I want to go there now!!"

The 'faith and dialogue' training journey set out to strengthen youth workers skills and resolve in tackling the challenge of addressing issues often seen as taboo. Early on in the training a participant from Armenia had commented : "Faith links to religion, but whereas religion is usually an open subject, discussions on faith can be taboo. For example, in my community to question someone's faith is to question their honour, it's therefore a taboo or risky topic." By the end of the 6 day course it seemed that the participants were better equipped to take the 'personal' to the 'public' arena of dialogue, and to help others begin to take some risks.

To conclude this piece I should tell you how I know so much about what went on at this Faith & Dialogue training course. Well, I am lucky enough to be the Rapporteur for the course and will also be for the Inter-Religious Dialogue course in Istanbul. The result of all my listening and observation will be an Educational Report on 'Faith, Religion and Dialogue', narrated in the words of the trainers, participants and others. This will be available from the SALTO web site (www.salto-youth.net) and will also be presented at a Tool Fair in December 2007 in Antalya, Turkey. For more information on the Tool Fair see the Euromed Resource Centre's pages on the SALTO net, and for more about the wonderful trainers putting their faith in dialogue - Barbara Bello, Behrooz Motamed Afshari, and Julia Koszewska - go to the trainers pages on the Cultural Diversity RC on the same SALTO portal:

www.salto-youth.net/find-a-trainer ■



Notes and references :



- All methods and activities run by the trainers during this course can be found at: www.salto-youth.net/find-a-tool . Some inspiration on the background of the sessions can be found at: www.salto-youth.net/faithdialogueresources
- www.salto-youth.net/diversity
SALTO Cultural Diversity Resource Centre responds to the needs of the users of the European Youth in Action programme in order to provide training and resources about Cultural Diversity. Over the last year we have been concentrating on Communication, with a seminar on effective and sensitive intercultural communication, leading into this Faith & Dialogue training course. We hope to take these issues further in the European year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008.
- You can learn more about David Bohm and his approaches to dialogue by reading the articles and training resources available from the Dialogue Group at www.thedialoguegrouponline.com
- Banathy, Bela H. & Jenlink, Patrick M. (2005) *Dialogue as a Means of Collective Communication*, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, New York,
- Bohm, David and Edwards, Mark. (1992) *Changing Consciousness, Exploring the Hidden Source of the Social, Political and Environmental Crises Facing our World*. Pegasus, New York, NY.
- Bohm, David. *On Dialogue*. David Bohm Seminars. Ojai, CA.
- For more about the innovative support to dialogue at the Corrymeela Centre see www.corrymeela.org
- A good website to find training resources using and explaining 'mandalas' is www.themandalaproject.org

Contact :



simonforrester@yahoo.com

