

Developing Links With Norway

Simon Cutmore reports on the Diocesan visit to Norway earlier this year

Eight of us met in the queue to check in to fly from Stanstead to Torp airport last February, walking boots on, and bracing ourselves for sub-zero temperatures. As we gathered, some of us were acquaintances. Others were names in the diocesan directory or on one of the many updates on information that we had been sent leading up to this trip. It is amazing to think that only a few days later we would leave as friends.

History of Church and State

Our visit began with an introduction to the history of the Church of Norway and its relationship with the State at Church House. The Church of Norway is a State Church with the King as its constitutional head, but with very close ties to Government and the Municipal authorities. The latter are similar to Borough councils, providing an organizational and financial framework for the church. Norway is by no means a provincial church though. It was one of the founding members of the World Council of Churches and is signatory to many key ecumenical documents including the Porvoo Agreement.

Religious Education

In 2003 the Parliament voted to reform the Church's religious education programme. As a result, a Government funded, but Church organised project (to the tune of NOK 250 million), has been launched to provide 315 hours of religious education in each parish for all children between 0-18 years.

From the Government's point of view, both religious and secular communities are required to help children develop an understand of their own individuality, culture and traditions, as a foundation for building respect and tolerance of others in a racially mixed society. The project draws on Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children have the right to spiritual development. The Church welcomes the opportunity to re-think and revitalise its teaching at a time when attendance at church and sunday school by young people has plummeted.

We went on to discuss this initiative with the Government through its State Secretary for Church and Cultural Affairs Berit Oknes Gjerlow. And we began to realise over the days of our visit what a vital and challenging project this is. It clearly demonstrates ways in which the Church of Norway is engaging with the question of how to be church. We witnessed practical ways in which this question is being tackled. We met primary school children at Lommendalen parish on their weekly religious activity. We saw examples of contemporary church architecture where congregations are trying to meet the needs of the community of which

they are a part. And we heard of ways in which the Diocese of Oslo is engaging in inter-faith work, recognizing the diverse nature of Norwegian society.

Faith in the City

Our visit was supported by the Diocesan Europe Group and lead by Peter Budgell of St Anne's, Luton. The Diocesan Urban Forum as part of its mission to develop international links within the diocese enabled SRO Kemi Akinruli to join the visit. She shared with her Norwegian counterparts some of the insights from the UK Faith in City initiative and the grassroots projects supported through the Church Urban Fund. In return we learned about the Church of Norway's own God in the City programme in Oslo.

Having heard about the history and contemporary life of the Church, we also shared in worship at Nordberg Church in the suburbs. Members of our group took part in the service, and to acclimatize us most of the hymns were to familiar tunes leaving us to struggle with the Norwegian words! The rest of the service was fully translated into English through earphones including the sermon. After coffee we had lunch with various members of the congregation and enjoyed the opportunity to meet Norwegians in the their own homes.

For the eight of us who went (Kemi Akinruli, Peter Budgell, Simon Cutmore, Helen Hutchison, Hilary Sharman, Sheila and Tom Thurman and Pam Wise) this visit proved hugely rewarding. We each returned personally energized and excited at what God is doing elsewhere in His Church. We see this visit not as a means to an end, but as the Porvoo Agreement itself hopes for, the beginning of friendships personally, between Dioceses and Churches.