

IARF PEACE MAKING VISIT TO NORTHERN IRELAND

27th to 31st August 2014

With WCF's blessing, I had the great opportunity of participating in the post – IARF 34th Congress three day visit to Belfast and County Antrim. Revd Chris Hudson, MBE, the non-Prescribing Presbyterian Minister of All Souls Church and a key figure in the peace making process between the divided communities in Northern Ireland, had put together a packed programme for visitors to learn about the experiences of Loyalist and Republican groups first hand, to engage in a community dialogue with people who were working for fostering community harmony and understanding, and to visit the key sites of the troubles including the guided tour of the Crumlin Road jail, which had been converted to a Museum.

We stayed at the picturesque Drumalis Retreat Centre, about twenty miles away from Belfast from where we made a lovely journey on a scenic route. We saw flags everywhere in Belfast, not just associated with local communities but also the causes supported by either side such as Israeli and Palestinian flags. In the Loyalist areas even the kerb stones were in Union Jack colours and republican flags in Catholic areas. Residents divided by the Peace Wall, which has become a tourist attraction visited by coach loads of outsiders, rarely cross over to the other side even though their homes may be a hundred yards from each other. Businesses such as McDonalds also ply their trade in two restaurants quite close to each other geographically, to cater for the needs of these separate communities.

Some of the memorable events for me were:-

- ³⁵/₁₇ Interfaith Service led by Revd Chris Hudson at All Souls Church. The Church was full of people representing the different faith communities in Northern Ireland. There were readings and musical contributions shared by members of Christian denominations, Bahais and Jewish communities. From the visiting group, Pejman Khojasteh gave a talk about Islam, Yehuda Stolov brought Jewish and Interfaith perspective from Israel and Ajit and I shared a hymn from the Sikh Scripture about Peace. Caecilia Peski, a Dutch woman, currently an observer in the Ukraine, who was held kept for four days there, shared a Dutch hymn with us. I found it a very rewarding and enjoyable service, especially a very poignant one as it was held in the evening in the middle of the week.
- ³⁵/₁₇ Conversations with two previous inmates of Crumlin Road Jail who had committed murders as paramilitary men for their respective political groups and had spent 15 to 20 years for their crimes till they were released under the Good Friday agreement. One had turned his life round by becoming a creative director of a theatre group with steps towards reconciliation. The other person had moved on but there was not much coming together with the other community.
- ³⁵/₁₇ Visit to the Crumlin Road Jail which had a history of over a hundred years. Children and women were also imprisoned there and some suffragettes, too. At the height of troubles, different wings were used

for loyalists and republicans. We were shown how those who received the death sentence were treated and eventually hanged. We were shown the plot of land where they were buried, not in any sanctified ground but even in death there was no forgiveness. They had paid for their cruel deeds with the punishment of death by hanging, yet there could be no peace or dignity for them and their families. As a person of a different faith, I found it hard that there was no generosity of spirit or humanity shown to them.

³⁵₁₇ The most enjoyable part of the trip was to experience the coastal area of County Antrim and to walk on the Giants Causeway, a UNESCO heritage site. It is simply breath taking!

Overall, I am really grateful for being enabled to have a wonderful learning experience. I feel highly blessed and enriched.

Charanjit AjitSingh