



international association for

religious freedom  
belief with integrity

*“Religious language calls us to act, ... to embrace our lives and the life of our world with gratitude and reverence. If we apply this ...to interfaith work, then our challenge is to create opportunities for religious people to share in talking about and praying for our world, in doing what we can together, and in supporting each other ...”*

*Bishop Arpad Szabo - “Our Common Challenge” at IARF Belfast*

## IARF CONFERENCE – BELFAST - 24-27 JULY 2008

Belfast was host to two related conferences 24-27 July, 2008. On 24 July the European Liberal Protestant Network (ELPN) met in the church sanctuary. The ELPN *“exists to bring together European Liberal Protestants within the International Association for Religious Freedom.”*

ELPN brings together the Non-Subscribing Presbyterians, the Transylvania Unitarians, Remonstrants and other liberal Protestants from the Netherlands and Germany. After the welcome, a memorial silence honoured the Rev. Peronne Boddaert, the European Organizer of IARF, who tragically died last year.

Speakers including Rev. Chris Hudson of All Souls Church, Belfast, & Rev. Tina Geels of Utrecht called for a renewal of our liberal witness in our churches, in the IARF, and in our world. Rev. Nigel Playfair, Adrian Moir & the Presbyterians of Belfast were fine hosts at the reception that afternoon & for the IARF Conference the next two days.

Participants stayed at a variety of Bed and Breakfasts. Ours was at Helen’s Bay, 10 miles east of Belfast. Early morning I walked to the water and watched the sunrise on Helen’s Bay

A path of sunbeams  
Over the tiny waves of morning  
On the left, a ship  
sailing into Belfast.  
Belfast - Shipyard of the Titanic.  
Belfast - a city that seems from another age.

We meet in the First Presbyterian Church,  
the oldest church in the city.  
Church hidden behind an iron fence,  
Out of sight on a walking street.  
Good people inside,  
discussing being liberal Christian.  
Ladies treat us with wine and biscuits.  
The Transylvanians feel at home.  
They too have known long years of **struggles**.  
The **TROUBLES** still live in the heart.

Friday morning the IARF Conference opened. The Rt. Rev William McMillan spoke from his long history with the IARF: *“As a student, I assisted with the IARF Congress in Belfast in 1955. American Unitarian President Frederick May Eliot quoted Thomas Jefferson to us: **“Error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is free to combat it.”***

McMillan told us, *“This is not a time for gentile liberals who avoid explosive issues. There is so much trash in advertisements today, liberals shy from challenging the evils. Liberals today have become morally lazy. ... We have excused wrong where we should have condemned it.”*

After McMillan’s lecture, we split into three workshops: Shlomo Alon led a discussion of “Religion in the Middle East ...,” Sandor Mathe led “Religion and the European Union.” Tina Gells and others discussed plans for the European Liberal Protestant Network (ELPN). The workshops were helpful in allowing everyone to speak up. Three more workshops were held Saturday morning: 1) “Human Rights,” 2) “A History of IARF” by former IARF Staff member Lucie Meijer. 3) “IARF Europe: The move ahead.” This concluded with Gudrun Hahn & Wolfgang Jantz extending an invitation from Germany for **a meeting of IARF Europe & Middle East in Frankfurt, 20, 21 October 2009.**

I will only try to give a high point from each of six lectures we heard. Rev. Wytse Dijkstra, leading organizer of the conference, spoke on RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SPACE. With a quotation from a speech this January, she set her theme, **God is back, but the churches have yet to get used to it** (*her full text is available*). This theme of the Spirit moving beyond the churches into the marketplace was taken up by the Rev. Ivo de Jong in a multimedia programme in the afternoon. He carried us from the songs of Van “The Man” Morrison to Rembrandt’s painting of the prodigal son.

*When you’ve given up hope & you’re down in despair.  
When you’ve given up – and you sit in your room and you’re all alone  
And you turn to the one and you turn inside for a while:  
Say, help me angel, Oh, no, never let the spirit die.*

- **van Morrison**

The TROUBLES in Northern Ireland & the work of Reconciliation were presented in three ways: First, the Rev. Lena Cockcroft told us the story of Lagan College, the first religiously integrated secondary school in Northern Ireland. Its motto, UIT SINT UNIM, *“That they may be One.”* Dr David Stevens. A bus tour in the afternoon took us to beautiful parks, also along HIGH FENCES topped with rolls of barbed wire, separating Protestant and Catholic Neighbourhoods.

After dinner in the modern central hall of the church, Dr. David Stevens told us the story of the **Corrymeela Community**, which won the Niwano Peace Prize in 1997. Like the writing of Kurt Vonnegut, the story begins with the 1945 Bombing of Dresden. Ray Davey, the founder of **Corrymeela**, like Vonnegut, was a prisoner who survived the fire

bombing of Dresden. His 1945 memories of bodies and ruins of Dresden were part of the inspiration that led him in 1965 to organize a community of reconciliation in Northern Ireland with a centres both on the North Coast near Ballycastle, and in Belfast.

*The vision was global as well as local. ...*

*Reconciliation is a practice, not a theory*

*It is only with relationship and trust that reconciliation can be built..  
One of the challenges for churches is providing a space, a safe space,  
where painful stories can be shared: sexuality, fear & THE TROUBLES..*

*In Corrymeela, we knew from the beginning,*

*That without a stable political settlement,*

*Trust and reconciliation would always be vulnerable.*

*So we have always been involved in political reconciliation.*

As we approached the end of Belfast IARF, two lectures focused on the future of the IARF. First, Bishop Arpad Szabo gave an excellent paper on OUR COMMON CHALLENGE: IARF, ITS PURPOSE AND FUTURE. (*full text available*). First, Bishop Szabo stressed the importance of using personal language, speaking from roots in our own religious community and tradition. *“Our words shape the reality to which we respond.”* Speaking from the struggles of his own church in Transylvania, he warned of barriers to cooperation which are intellectual, emotional and in memories of historic conflict. *“It is hardly surprising that religious communities resent and mistrust one another.”*

“If interfaith cooperation is a religious virtue, then what it opposes might be thought of as religious vice:

*The first religious vice is violence ...*

*The second religious vice is intolerance ...*

*But being tolerant does not mean remaining silent when others espouse beliefs that encourage violence, hatred, and the denial of fundamental human rights. We cannot successfully promote tolerance without at the same time opposing intolerance. ...*

*The third religious vice is self-righteousness.*

*We might say that this is the root cause of the other two vices,*

*As it is the blindness and arrogance of self-righteousness*

*That breeds religious violence and intolerance. ....*

Recognizing the diverse religious traditions in the IARF and the World Community, Bishop Szabo gives three principles to guide our vision of a common future:

*First, gratitude - a sense of thanksgiving ...*

*This is Albert Schweitzer’s principle of reverence for life.*

*It is the basic religious experience that life is not merely of our making,  
but that we are the recipient of a life that is greater than we are. ...*

*Second, all life is related -*

*Today we refer to this as the ecological nature of life, but religious people  
have known of ecology long before the term was coined. ...*

*Third, life is sacred. ...*

*There is a dimension that transcends life as we generally know it,*

*And this dimension gives shape, focus, and purpose to our life ...*

Fittingly, IARF President Thomas Mathew from India had the final word. He told us of the six major current projects of the IARF:

- 1) In mid August 2008, a **youth conference** in Jordan with 35 to 40 participants.
- 2) The **Human Rights Education Project** continues in the Philippines, India, and Sri Lanka.
- 3) The **India Chapter** of the IARF is meeting in Mysore, 23-26 August.
- 4) April 2009, in Amersfort, the Netherlands, there will be an IARF Conference for **Women in Ministry**.
- 5) Our witness at the **United Nations** guided by Dr. John Taylor. ... IARF is one of less than 200 groups which have full consulting status with the UN.
- 6) **The 2010 IARF Congress** will be held 4-7 September in Cochin city in southern Kerala, India. There will be low cost rooms for about US \$30 a night. Rooms in a three star hotel about \$70 a night. In 2010 a new IARF Council will be elected.

The IARF Office is now hosted by the Konkoko Church of Izuo, Osaka, Japan. Thanks to Robert Papini and the unpaid volunteers who staff the office , This arrangement may change after the 2010 Congress.

In a short closing business meeting, the conference gave a vote of **"Thanks to the Japan IARF Committee."** Also a vote of thanks to Dr. John Taylor and our great youth organizer, Moses Flores, along with an invitation for them to participate in IARF Frankfurt, 20, 21 October 2009.

We thank Wytske Dijkstra, Adrian Moir & the Non-Subscribing Presbyterians of Northern Ireland for an inspiring conference in which we witnessed the lessons of reconciliation practiced in slowly healing *"The Troubles"* of Northern Ireland.

On Saturday Night, All Souls Presbyterian, Belfast, hosted a fun closing dinner with a band & folk dancing. Sunday morning, participants scattered to some of the 33 congregations of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Northern Ireland.

In the week that followed, five of us enjoyed the rugged Northern Coast: the birds of Rathlin Island, the hexagonal columns of Giant's Causeway:

*Under the organ pipes of stone,  
swifts fly in the afternoon sun.  
Offshore, a sunken Spanish Galleon  
from the Armada of 1588.  
A great rock sticks its head up like a turtle.  
Clouds meet cliffs and waves.  
A sea lion claps flippers in play.  
The ocean shimmers, molten silver.  
Humans are small potatoes  
Meeting the majesty of earth.*

Richard Boeke  
Horsham  
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