

GERARD MANNION

# Fresh hope from Umbria's hills

The ecumenical winter that descended in the 1980s blighted the lives of Churches, causing strained relations within and across faiths. Last week a gathering in Italy suggested that the will and energy exist to reignite the flame of dialogue

Assisi 2012 drew together more than 250 participants from 55 countries – and from many different Churches and faith communities – to explore new ways of advancing the cause of dialogue. It was intended not so much as a conference, a convention, or even an event, as the beginning of a process. The Umbrian hilltop town was chosen as the venue because of its long association with openness, charity, dialogue, peace, harmony and communion, and with the particular charisms of the religious orders founded by St Francis and St Clare. They have helped inspire countless ventures in promoting dialogue and openness among peoples.

The organisers, the ecumenical Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network, set out to bring as many people as possible to the table from beyond Europe and North America, and the participants included representatives from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania. There were not only old ecumenical hands, but a large number of emerging scholars, too – the people who will have to deliver in the long term on dialogue free of obstacles. This was also a key intention. The gathering in each of the main holy sites of Assisi provided times for participants to engage in dialogue through simply being and sharing together throughout the week. No one attended as an official delegate. What we were involved in was something different from, but complementary to, official processes of dialogue between Churches and faiths.

An analogy can be drawn with diplomatic processes in conflict situations. Paul Arthur, Emeritus Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Ulster and veteran of conflict-resolution initiatives around the globe, shared some lessons from peace processes that ecumenical and interfaith dialogue might learn.

A framework has been developed in recent years which delineates between different processes and practitioners in such diplomacy and situations of conflict and tension. It is called the "Tracks of Diplomacy Framework". Essentially, Track 1 involves official voices – such as Foreign Office personnel. Track 2 involves non-official and grass-roots voices

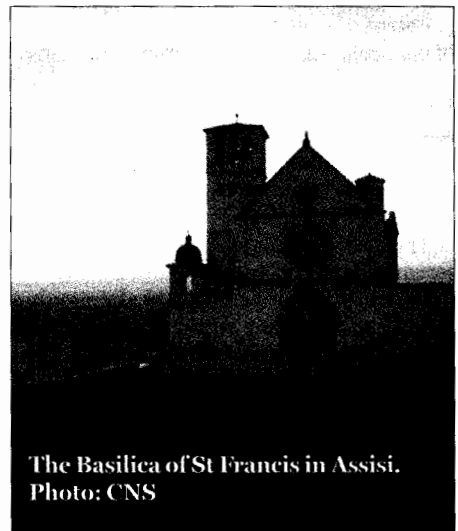
and practitioners. Recent studies of the distinctive forms of such diplomacy demonstrate that the dividing lines between official and non-official diplomacy is no longer so clearly demarcated as once believed, and no longer so rigid.

What has emerged is a "Track 1-and-a-half" diplomacy, which tries to bridge the gap between 1 and 2 and encourage a two-way exchange of insight and inspiration. Ecumenical and interfaith efforts can learn much from this, and Assisi 2012 sought to


test this experiment (rather than just be an event where differing factions and competing interest groups came together to rehearse overtly familiar arguments about lines in the sand that divide people of differing faiths communities today).

"Formal scripts" were neither required nor desired at Assisi. This was why it was especially significant that, with the exception of the Umbrian hosts, all participants were invited as private individuals not as representatives

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The Basilica of St Francis in Assisi. Photo: CNS



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of particular Churches, traditions and organisations. Of course, many have been and are involved in official "Track 1" modes of dialogue and were encouraged to speak from their experience, though not to a party line. The priority was to discern what ways will work best in our own times.

The most pressing challenge is how the different ecumenical and interfaith endeavours can be brought together, a challenge that might mean thinking outside the box. It does not mean jettisoning the past or rejecting or neglecting other forms of dialogue and ecumenical and interfaith achievement, but instead making use of their lessons. For example, one could say that placing the emphasis upon where people dwell in common was Pope John XXIII's intention when he called the Second Vatican Council. But many theologians and faith community leaders, particularly among Christians (and perhaps especially in the Catholic Church) in subsequent decades have rejected such an approach in favour of accentuating difference to the detriment of dialogue and commonality.

We all know, of course, that there has been much discourse about dialogue at the official level by formal bodies and committees and institutions, just as there has been much literature about grassroots initiatives and collaboration. What there is relatively little attention to at present, however, is how a

bridge might be made between these two levels – which is what those involved in Assisi 2012 want to do.

Bridge-builders who spoke included the Iranian Muslim Bahar Davary, who called for a more fully engaged theological and social dialogue between Christians and Muslims; Fulata Mbanu-Moyo from Malawi, who explained the work of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians; and Professor Mary McClintock Fulkerson, of Duke Divinity School, North Carolina, who called for a focus on "doing as a way of knowing" for making difficult dialogue possible, whereby we come to understand one another more fully through engagement with and being alongside the religious "others" in our societies.

Peter Phan, professor of Catholic social thought at Georgetown University, Washington DC, urged us to re-imagine the *oikoumene* – the single believing community – today that gives due priority to the cultural and spiritual realities of the whole world, not just of two privileged continents. There were contributions, too, from South Africa (Professor John De Gruchy, of Cape Town, and the priest and social entrepreneur Edwin Arrison) on overcoming seemingly insurmountable differences through persistently not letting the burdens of history and religious tribalism prevail over our futures.

There will be further initiatives through the auspices of the Ecclesiological

Investigations International Research Network that will continue the work of Assisi 2012. In May next year the network's annual international gathering will meet in Serbia, when the 1,700th anniversary of the Edict of Milan will be marked. This was, itself, a moment from history that epitomises so many issues, challenges and tensions concerning where the peoples and faiths of the world dwell in common and what things divides them.

As the participants wound their way through the hills and mountainous splendour of Umbria their imaginations would no doubt have been captured. Looking across the landscape, the horizon can appear to stretch on and on and change momentarily depending on one's vantage point. Our gathering together was about looking beyond the contemporary ecumenical and inter-religious horizon – seeking understanding, sharing differing perspectives, looking beyond the narrow, confined viewpoints that remain divisive, being transformed and inspired by ongoing conversations from so many different countries and many more different contexts and faith communities.

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