



## Opening and Welcome

A warm welcome on behalf of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and of Church and Peace! As chairperson of Church and Peace I am pleased that we are now having the sixth Regional Britain and Ireland Day. We started with a one-day conference at Birmingham in 2014. The topic was picking up the *Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*, launched by the World Council of Churches

2016, *"And they shall live secure" - Theological reflection and practical action*;  
2017, *Peace Church in a world of conflict? Answering the biblical call to nonviolence*;  
2019, *Peace is not a fairy tale - we have to work to make it happen*;  
2020, *The real cost of war* - together with the Fellowship of reconciliation - as it is this year again.

Thanks for this fruitful cooperation! Thanks to Barbara and John! Thanks to Lydia!  
And now 2021, our theme is *Building Peace from the Ground up*.

We have always sought to address peace in the broadest sense, to include fragmentation within societies, racism and its effects, climate change (e.g. the carbon footprint of the military), refugee and asylum issues; and so the topics we are discussing in this meeting fit seamlessly into that pattern (tackling hate, lobbying, real anti-racism).

Thanks to modern technology we can welcome speakers from Belgium and Scotland as well as more locally. Thanks to everyone of you who shares her or his experiences and wisdom with us! And we are happy to welcome as well interested people from our networks, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Church and Peace network all around Europe.

Let me come to one of the issues that destroy peaceful coexistence and which will be discussed in a moment: Hate and hate speech. Only three days ago I heard on the radio about a book that describes the history of blasphemy.<sup>1</sup> The provocative thesis was, that there is an correlation between blasphemy and hate speech. Since the beginning of religion - Christianity included - people who are followers of a faith tend to defame and devalue others who do not share that belief. It is attractive to blame that what is sacred for others.

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<sup>1</sup> Deutschlandfunk (10. März 2021): Gotteslästerung - "Blasphemie wirkt wie ein Identitäts-Generator", [https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/gotteslaesterung-blasphemie-wirkt-wie-ein-identitaets.886.de.html?dram:article\\_id=493839](https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/gotteslaesterung-blasphemie-wirkt-wie-ein-identitaets.886.de.html?dram:article_id=493839);

Gerd Schwerhoff (2021): Verfluchte Götter. Die Geschichte der Blasphemie

The young Christian community for example was also very aggressive in defending the new religion - and doing this - accusing others of being 'Jews' or 'pagans'. One can find this connection between blasphemy and hate speech throughout the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament and the history of religions: on the one hand, aggressively blaspheming others - but on the other hand, being very sensitive when one's own God is devalued, when others attack one's own God.

Hate speech creates identity, that was the main thesis. Hate speech and blasphemy as a generator of identity.

What was and what is another way to share our faith, our identity as people on the pilgrimage of justice and peace? What does it mean building communities of peace – without blaming others? What about identity and what about diversity? I am very much looking forward to reflecting and discussing this with you today!

At the June 2018 international conference of Church and Peace at High Leigh, Hoddesdon, the Rev. Inderjit Bhogal of the Methodist Church in Britain was our key note speaker. Then, he concluded with a Prayer for Peace. I invite you to join me now in this prayer:

*God, bless us with a holy anger  
that rages against injustice, hatred, terrorising war and violence,  
and sheds tears for those who are hurt or killed;  
that refuses to hide in despair,  
or to accept easy answers,  
and bland platitudes of politics.*

*Bless us with a wholesome thirst for righteousness, justice and peace,  
and the conviction  
that we can make the world a better place  
without resorting to killing machinations or machines.  
Teach us the art of forgiveness and reconciliation,  
and how to restore respect and confidence in relationships.  
Amen*

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