

**Minister's Letter**  
***Sister Helen Julian CSF Minister Provincial of the First Order Sisters,  
European Province, writes:***



Dear Friends,

'Presence and Engagement' is the title of a report on the church's task in a multi faith society, debated at the General Synod in July 2005. It was also the theme of a sermon preached by the Bishop of Leicester in July 2007 at a welcome service for the two sisters who have recently gone to live in Leicester, starting a new CSF presence in that city. We are grateful to the diocese and the parish for their invitation, and their welcome.

Christine James and Moyra arrived at the end of June and moved into a flat on the St Matthew's Estate, part of the parish of the Resurrection. The estate is at the city centre end of this wedge shaped parish. It is home to a very varied population, ethnically and religiously, with many children and a recent influx of Somali refugees, and is materially poor. The sisters are living in a former pub, which is also home to a children's project, and a chapel used by the parish for some of its services. There is no church building on the estate, and so our sisters are 'the church presence'. And their first task has been simply to be present, to pray, and to get to know the neighbourhood, so that they may discern what kind of engagement will be appropriate.

The church's report valued this kind of presence. "In an increasingly fragmented and fluid society a stable presence is a powerful and counter cultural symbol of the unchanging love of God for humanity. Continued presence in a physical neighbourhood can be a particularly powerful sign with an undiminished potential to be an authentic expression of what it is to engage with otherness from in the midst."

When C of E parishes are ranked in order of the proportion of 'parishioners' of faiths other than Christianity, this particular parish is among the top ten in the country. From the 2001 Census figures, three of the top ten parishes in this category were in the diocese of Leicester; and others with a high percentage included Birmingham and London, in both of which sisters and brothers have a presence. But this is not a phenomenon confined to only a few dioceses; there were, from the 2001 figures, 900 parishes in 35 dioceses where at least 10% of the population were from faiths other than Christianity, of which 228 had between 25% and 50%, and 62 had over 50%. These figures have undoubtedly increased since the Census.

This could seem threatening; but in fact the report found "more hope than anxiety, more creativity than stagnation and more generosity than resentment." It went on to speak of its discovery "of the way in which the gospel continues as ever to be alive, attractive and compelling when we engage with it in the context of otherness and diversity. Not only are others changed, but just as important, we ourselves are changed, enlarged and energised."

We in CSF hope that our presence in Leicester will in some measure "change, enlarge and energise" us. Perhaps this can also be a hope for our church as we approach the Lambeth Conference later in 2008, and grapple with the otherness and diversity within the Anglican Communion? And more parochially, as we in the Society of St Francis continue to seek to discern future shapes for the religious life, as we continue to explore ways of others living with us and alongside us in some of our houses, may we find our way of living the gospel made more alive, attractive and compelling by the challenges which others bring us, and the insights they share with us.

Pax et bonum - Peace and all good