

# A visit to our 'Friendship Diocese' of Møre

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VERY recently, Clare MacLaren, Alison Rudd and I were privileged to represent the Diocese in a visit to our 'Link Diocese' of Møre in Norway.

The Norwegians use the term 'Friendship Diocese' which we liked as it seems a better reflection of our link of mutual friendship. We were invited to attend their clergy conference to celebrate the 500th Anniversary of Luther's Reformation. The theme of the conference was 'Many Voices - One Song', a powerful metaphor which has remained with me. It reminds us of our fundamental unity in Christ despite our many apparent differences.

One difference we learnt about was the unusual nature of their Reformation history. The change from Roman Catholicism to Lutheranism happened gradually and without bloodshed. This was largely because the king at that time (Christian III of Denmark) decreed it. This meant that many of the churches retained Catholic practices and ornamentation, although a later Pietist movement, led by Hans Nielsen Hauge, did reinforce their Protestant values.

Until this year, the Lutheran church was part of state apparatus and paid for by the state. Its financial future is now more uncertain. We too are facing a reduction in funding and the challenge this brings. So maybe we can find ways to support each other?

It is impossible to convey the wonder and beauty of all we experienced, so here are a few snapshots:

- We are in a lively Sunday morning service surrounded by families with young children. They are there for a special annual service in which all the four-year-olds who've been baptised there are presented with a book full of pictures, songs and stories about Jesus and the Bible. An idea we could try maybe?

- It is early morning at Møre Retreat House, deep in the forest, and I am standing in their award-winning chapel. The deep silence was so thick with prayer that you could almost touch it.

- I am in our 'Music Workshop' at the conference - Clare leading us in singing an African 'Amen'. Bishop Ingeborg's face is alight with fun and laughter as she enthusiastically joins in.

- We are standing by an ancient wooden farmhouse perched on a narrow ledge high above a fjord with more steep cliffs above. The view is breathtakingly beautiful, but how did people survive there? It was a very harsh and difficult life.

Norway is a beautiful country with dramatic scenery of mountains and fjords, and our hosts were very generous in showing us some of the spectacular scenery of Møre. We learnt how vital the sea, fishing and boats are to their existence. Recently, since the advent of their oil wealth, they have built many new bridges and tunnels, but there are still plenty of fjords which can only be crossed by ferry. Many churches are isolated on small islands only accessible by boat and their tiny congregations can face even greater challenges than our remote Northumberland hamlets.

Many people spoke enthusiastically of their friendship with our Diocese and we were asked to bring you their warmest greetings, especially from Bishop Ingeborg, whom some of you will have met on one of her visits here. We may have many voices, but we can all sing the same song of God's love for our needy world.

