

Temple Tracts: Issue 5, Volume 1

# The Interfaith Movement

Philip Lewis and Charlotte Dando



**William Temple**  
Foundation

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## Introduction

Former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple was a leader of the ecumenical movement as well as a pioneer of what we now call interfaith work. In 1942, with the backdrop of World War II and the extreme persecution of Jewish people across Europe, together with Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz, Temple founded the Council of Christians and Jews. In a statement marking Temple's untimely death a few years later, the Jewish World Congress wrote, 'Lamented by the Christian world, the premature death of Dr. Temple will be particularly mourned by the Jewish people whose champion he was,' (Iremonger, 1948: 167).

Fast forward nearly sixty years and the question of Christian relations with Jewish people, and now more commonly, with Muslims and other minority religions, remains pertinent. Circumstances and contexts have changed, but the difficulty of interreligious or interfaith relations is one which many people of faith (and indeed, many from non-religious backgrounds) are still grappling with.

In this *Temple Tract* the authors draw on our different experiences of working within the interfaith movement. As the former Interfaith Advisor to the Anglican Bishop of Bradford and a lecturer in the Department of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford, Philip Lewis was pivotal in the early institutionalisation of interfaith work, helping to connect Christian clergy and Muslim *ulama* as well as building structures for enhanced civic cooperation between different faith groups. In contrast, Charlotte Dando's interfaith work has focused on grassroots and youth-led projects, as well as capacity building initiatives aimed at better equipping existing young interfaith activists, both in the UK and throughout Europe. Through bringing together our collective experiences we hope to offer a more holistic perspective of current models of interfaith work – both the continuation of historic models as well as those currently being pioneered. We also offer a critical view of the future of interfaith work in England, offering a number of suggestions for how to increase and improve interfaith activities. Whilst this *Temple Tract* is interested in all forms of interfaith cooperation and concerned with how best to develop all interfaith initiatives, we take relations between Christians – in particular the Church of England – and Muslims as a core case study.

## A very brief history of the interfaith movement

The origins of what might be called "the interfaith movement" can be traced back to Chicago in 1893 and the thousand strong meeting of religious representatives, the Parliament of the World's Religions. The 1907 formation of the International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers was to become the nowadays International Association for Religious Freedom, which considers itself to be the world's oldest global interreligious organisation. Three decades after that meeting, in 1936, Sir Francis Younghusband established in London the World Congress of Faiths. The Congress aimed to foster unity and understanding, leading to peace-work amongst the major religious traditions (World Congress of Faiths, 2013).

Christian churches have long engaged bi-lateral relations with other religions; whether the Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ) set up in the dark days of the Second World War in 1942 or the national Christian Muslim Forum (CMF) established in 2006, whose founder patron was the then Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams. A Conservative government for its part established the Inner City Religious Council (ICRC) in 1992, located within the Department of the Environment as part of a shared response to the Church of England's critical 1984 *Faith in the City* report, which drew attention to the extent of the poverty in Britain's urban areas. The ICRC began an ever-expanding circle of government 'initiatives linking religion, community, urban neighbourhood and social cohesion.' (Grillo, 2009: 50 -

71). Religious communities were seen as having people, networks and organisations which would build programmes to engage hard-to-reach communities and foster urban regeneration.<sup>1</sup>

The British discourse on minorities has ‘mutated’ from a discourse on colour in the 1950s and 1960s, to race in the 1960s-1980s, ethnicity in the 1990s, to religion in the present (Peach, 2005: 18 – 30). While these categories were never mutually exclusive, the shift has been driven both top-down by government policy and bottom up by some Muslims wishing to prioritise religion over ethnicity in self-representation. Whilst demographic changes in the post-war decades brought new religious practices and beliefs to the UK, it was not until 1987 however, when a coordinated effort dedicated to interreligious relations was established in the form of the Inter Faith Network for the UK.

The Labour government’s return to power in 1997 saw a proliferation of such initiatives congenial to its communitarian turn, drawing *inter alia* on Robert Putnam’s research (see in particular, Putnam’s (2001) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*) around the importance of social capital. ‘The Local Interfaith Guide’ was funded in 1999, advising local authorities how to go about establishing or strengthening such groups to meet the deficit in religious literacy of local policy makers. Yet amongst an increasingly secularising indigenous population, the question of interreligious relations was rarely prioritised in these government interactions and funding. The events of September 11th 2001, soon followed by the London bombings of July 7th 2005, suddenly placed religion under the spotlight, and questions of interreligious relations gathered a new sense of ‘urgency’ (Wingate, 2005: 1). The Inter Faith Network recorded around 30 local interfaith groups in 1987 and just short of 100 in 2000. By 2010 however, the figure had reached 240 (Pearce, 2012) marking a significant increase of interest in interfaith work. In 2003 the religious issues section of the Home Office Race Equality Unit was reconstituted to incorporate the new Faith Communities Unit, suggesting that a civic version of ‘faith’ was becoming as important as ‘race’ in the state’s management of minority ethnic affairs (McLoughlin, 2010: 123 – 149).

To enable religions, separately and together, to engage the socially excluded, to facilitate consultation between them and the state, and to promote ‘social cohesion’, money was made available by different government departments. A ‘Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund’ allocated £13.8 million between 2006 -8. Another £7.5 million was found for an initiative in 2008 – ‘Face to Face, Side by Side’ - to encourage interreligious dialogue and social action across traditions. Most recently, £5 million was given to the Church of England to fund the ‘Near Neighbours’ programme in 2011, discussed in more detail below.

For much of its history the interfaith movement placed dialogue at the heart of its activities. Work primarily engaging faith leaders (rather than individuals or communities) had been *de rigueur*. In the last decades however, new approaches encompassing grassroots multi-faith social action (such as that supported by the Near Neighbours programme), as well as youth leadership training, is generating significant changes (if not divides) within the interfaith community, as a new generation of interfaith activists emerge. The changing focus and demography of one of the UK’s most prominent interfaith organisations the Three Faiths Forum (3FF) offers an example of this shift. Conceived in 1997 as a forum for leaders from the Abrahamic religions, in 2004 the organisation introduced a schools programme to develop interfaith understanding amongst younger generations. It also opened its

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<sup>1</sup> William Temple Foundation has researched the vital role of faith-based organisations and their impacts on urban renewal in Manchester. See Baker and Skinner (2006).

doors from simply engaging Christians, Muslims and Jewish people, to working with people of all faith and belief backgrounds. Significantly, they also led the way towards a mainstream approach to interfaith work which includes those who are traditionally excluded from interfaith work, including atheists, humanists and those from minority religions. In 2007, 3FF launched an undergraduate leadership scheme, whilst the newer cultural programme *Urban Dialogues* concludes each year with an art exhibition and festival night at a gallery in the heart of hipster East London (3FF, 2015). Sadly, few other established interfaith organisations have demonstrated the same level of innovation and creativity, and it is perhaps unsurprising that many of the UK's major interfaith charities have faced funding crises in recent years.

In some interfaith circles, previous emphasis on dialogue is beginning to shift towards interfaith action and activism, aimed at engaging new, younger audiences, in-part inspired by the success of the USA based Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) which promotes 'common action for the common good' (IFYC, 2013) amongst student groups on US campuses. Models aimed at engaging UK university students are emerging, although with varying levels of success.

Although the term 'interfaith movement' is utilised for descriptive purposes throughout this paper, we could argue that what exists in the UK does not really constitute a 'movement', for the size and scope of interfaith work here is currently limited. The British interfaith movement is frequently misunderstood, often little appreciated, and suffers from an image problem, and therefore it is yet to gain the same momentum as its more buoyant US counterpart.

## Muslim integration into civil society

While some Muslim communities had won many gains locally, it was not until 1997 with the creation of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) that something approximating an umbrella body linking local organisations emerged. Given the diversity - ethnic and sectarian - of British Muslim communities, such a national body, so necessary to lobby for legal changes, remains a 'work in progress' (Lewis, 2007: 67). The MCB's arrival was welcomed by the new Labour government as a Muslim interlocutor, analogous to the Board of Deputies for British Jews. Soon after its formation, the MCB pressed for state funding of Muslim schools as an issue of equity and won the battle in 1998. In co-operation with the Church of England and other faiths, it persuaded the government to include a question in the 2001 decennial census on religion, the first time such a question had been included since 1851. The fact that the census showed 76.8% of Britons claiming a religious affiliation legitimised the inclusion of 'faith' alongside 'race' in the state's management of minority communities.

In Britain, Sikhs and Jews have long been accepted as ethnic groups protected by racial discrimination legislation, but this did not apply to Muslims who represent a great number of diverse backgrounds. Muslim demands for religious protection advocated in the 1997 Runnymede Trust report – 'Islamophobia a Challenge to us all' - had to wait, first until December 2003 when religious discrimination was outlawed in employment, then the Race and Religious Hatred Act of 2006, which made incitement to religious hatred an offence, and finally the Single Equality Act (2010). This act brought together and developed the various anti-discrimination laws that the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHCR) had been created to implement. With this act the government enacted 'religious legislation which goes beyond EU directives or indeed anything found in Europe.' (O'Toole et al, 2013: 1 – 10).

The 'Taking Part' report ( written by O'Toole et al, in 2013) noted that most of the £60 million set aside for one stream of anti-terrorism work - PREVENT from 2007-10 - went primarily to Muslim third sector organisations to counter violent extremism and was 'easily the largest single investment ever made in British Muslim civil society' (O'Toole, 2013: 20). Although this funding did not come without problems; many people are suspicious of PREVENT funding and its implications for trust and mutual respect between the UK government and British Muslim communities. As such, the acceptance or rejection of PREVENT funding has led to division amongst some civil society groups and Muslim organisations. Government priorities also led to funding the Young Muslim Advisory Group (YMAG) and the National Muslim Women's Advisory Group (NMWAG) to enhance the capacity of young people and women in Muslim communities to 'circumvent first-generation older male gatekeepers'; (O'Toole, 2013: 22) a significant issue, which will be touched on again below.

## The role of the Church of England

It is often argued that in a secular public sphere, the existence of a state religion upholds biases and preferential treatment for one religion over those of other faith and belief backgrounds. As the institutionalised state religion, the Church of England however, has actually done a great deal to facilitate the needs and voices of other religions within the public sphere. The Church of England over a period of forty years has funded specialist interfaith advisers, with most dioceses now having a full-time or part-time designated officer. These men and women have developed the local, contextual knowledge to advise clergy, policy makers and church leaders in their engagement with people of other faiths. There is now an impressive 'presence and engagement network' across the country resourced by the national Interfaith Adviser to the Church of England who also advises the Archbishop

of Canterbury. This indicates that such issues are now central to the life of the established church, as well as to their ecumenical partners.

An important dimension of the British establishment is how the public role of the Church of England has, in the name of equality, been pluralized to include other Christian denominations. As early as the Education Act of 1902, Roman Catholic schools were subsidised, since the Church of England's schools required such subsidies. 'The British state was in some way committed to Christianity and bound to be respectful of its representatives, as France was not, and this in practice provided a useful starting point for Catholic relations with government' (Hastings, 1990: 49). That pluralisation has now been stretched to make space for Islamic institutions: since Christians, then Jews, enjoyed their own state-funded schools, as well as private schools, so the Muslim communities won the right to enjoy a similar privilege. Today there are some twelve state-funded Islamic schools and more than 160 private schools.

Similarly, just as the Church of England has chaplains in a variety of institutions, including prisons and hospitals, so now it is common to find Muslim chaplains also. Indeed, one respected Islamic institution, the Markfield Centre in Leicester which offers training for Muslim chaplains, was set up with the active support and input from the local Anglican diocese and its Interfaith Adviser. Since the government funds students to study theology and religious studies at university, this institutional space has also been pluralized to include more and more courses on Islam.

Yet the UK government's familiarity with Church of England procedures and structures might be problematic in the integration of other faith groups within state funding and advisory networks. Unlike the Church of England, many of Britain's minority faith groups do not operate through similar hierarchies. For example, Muslim communities are often characterised by a virulent sectarianism imported from their home countries – especially South Asia - and exacerbated by global movements.<sup>2</sup> This means that government actors, both national and local, who are familiar with Church of England hierarchies, are frequently at a loss to know who its interlocutors are within Muslim communities. The state-officiated Anglican model does not easily transfer and many recognised "leaders" are self-imposed and self-designated, often with limited relationships with those whom they claim to represent. In particular, and increasingly, many younger people fail to recognise their legitimacy.

Whilst recognising the significant and pioneering role of the Church of England in interfaith work in Britain, it is also important to encourage other faith communities to take the lead in these activities. For the role of power and the question of equity must be considered when looking at the potential growth of the interfaith movement in the UK. When Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby recently spoke out on the need to discuss profound differences between religions, whilst agreeing with the Archbishop in principle, co-writer of this *Temple Tract* Charlotte Dando argued that the foundations have not yet been laid for such engagement. Can institutional forms of interfaith work ever begin from a level playing field whereby everyone is *equally different*? ([Dando, 2015](#)). For the white, upper middle-class, male leader of the Church of England, it is perhaps easier to begin conversations around difference because (in a British setting at least) you are the default position; the Archbishop *is not* that which is different or other. Just as the preferred method of engagement between faith communities and the state is via a structured hierarchy akin to the Church of England model, in Britain our definition

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent insight into such sectarianism see Bowen, 2014.

of religion is a modern product of Protestantism, which “set an agenda to which other faith traditions would be expected to conform” (Armstrong, 2014: 234).

Whilst institutional support for interfaith work is vital, and clearly an important early step in paving the way for everyday interreligious cooperation, perhaps some institutional approaches to interfaith work – especially those practiced exclusively by faith leaders - might be holding the conversations back. For as the Archbishop rightly notes, faith leaders are still struggling to engage in the most difficult conversations. Could this be where grassroots interfaith action holds an advantage? Can interfaith work amongst local communities and lay people reach depths of conversation beyond commonalities?

## A shift to the grassroots?

The former UK coalition government (2010 – 2015) boosted grassroots interfaith social action projects through £5 million awarded to fund the Near Neighbours programme, which first launched in autumn 2011, in just four urban areas, Birmingham, Bradford, Leicester and parts of East London. More than half the money went to bi-lateral groups, the Christian Muslim Forum (CMF), The Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ) and the Hindu Christian Forum (HCF) – all of which were pioneered by the Church of England but include other Christian denominations. A further £2m was devoted to small grants from £250 to £5,000 given to enable local projects involving two different communities or more in the four designated areas. Administered by the Church Urban Fund, Near Neighbours operates under the tagline ‘Bringing People Together’ and aims to build relationships and trust amongst diverse communities. Whilst the geographical boundaries of the programme have expanded slightly in recent years, funding has been concentrated in designated areas or “key locations” including the Pennine towns of Burnley, Oldham, Bradford and Rochdale, parts of Birmingham and Wolverhampton in the West Midlands, and east London and Luton. The programme appears to take a targeted approach directing interfaith community building initiatives to places of demonstrable tension; towns which, over recent years, have experienced the challenges of racial and religious tensions, often combined with high levels of poverty, which have at times resulted in violent altercations and public disturbances.

In an attempt to make lasting positive social change, unlike some traditional dialogic models of local interfaith organising, the Near Neighbours programme places equal weight on social action as well as interaction. It is not simply a matter of talking together but *working* together. Examples of Near Neighbours funded projects therefore include a wide range of projects, from befriending schemes for the elderly, to summer sports camps for children from underprivileged backgrounds, and more traditional interfaith activities such as sharing food and festivals with different faith communities. That the programme and the funding is administered by the Church Urban Fund, and applicants require the signature of the vicar in whose parish the activities take place, has been deemed problematic by some, and is an example of the privileging of the Church of England over other faith groups. However, so far some 39 per cent of participants have been Muslim and 36 per cent Christian. The Taking Part report concludes that Near Neighbours ‘does seem to be a success in terms of demonstrating the Church of England’s vitality, creativity and perhaps unique position for brokering solutions to common problems...’ (O’Toole, 2013: 51).

Grassroots work is also often better positioned to engage younger people and women in interfaith work. As noted above, engaging only designated leaders risks failing to reach those for whom interfaith work might have the greatest impact, as well as often failing to reach those who *actually* hold the most influence within a community. The Church realised in the late 1990s that there was a

need to engage directly with young people and women, both categories increasingly alienated from religious organisations dominated by older men, often born outside Britain. After 7/7 the government also gave this priority. However, as will be argued, the full equitable inclusion of young people in the interfaith movement remains a work in progress.

## The inclusion of younger people in interfaith work

There is a common misconception, perpetuated by the activities of some interfaith organisations, that one must be clergy, a community leader, or a scholar to take part in interfaith work. Research on the religious identities of young Muslim interfaith advocates<sup>3</sup>, highlighted this barrier with one participant, who is himself a chaplain, stating, 'it's a concern people have that 'I don't know enough' or 'I'm not the right person for it' [...] a lot of people perceive interfaith work as something done by the clergy.' Even if it is understood that interfaith work is not simply for clergy and leaders, Muslims might be unwilling, according to one participant, for they are 'reluctant to talk about their faith if they don't feel that they're a good example of being a Muslim,' (Dando, 2013).

The notion that one must be a 'religious representative' is perhaps, left-over baggage from the years when interfaith dialogue *was* the exclusive domain of clergy and theologians discussing their respective scriptures. This misunderstanding of contemporary interfaith work causes a twofold problem. Firstly, it may reduce the inclusivity and accessibility of interfaith engagement, repelling some of the people who stand to gain the most from such work. Further, as one interviewee suggests, this misunderstanding is detrimental to quality interaction. Those taking part may think 'I'm representing this and I better make sure I'm saying the right thing', the participant commented 'Yeah I mean it becomes a bit artificial.'

On a practical level, a barrier hinted at by many of the young Muslim interviewees, and directly addressed by numerous participants is the fact that interfaith engagement – in particular interfaith dialogue - can be perceived as boring. One interviewee describes the 'tea and samosa' format of interfaith dialogue as unattractive to younger people whilst another cheekily used the term 'the wrinkled face of interfaith'. This is, of course, a barrier for young people from all faith communities, not just the Muslim community. Some who work in the interfaith movement are attempting to tackle this image problem, yet there is also resistance and unwillingness to embrace change and to create spaces for the full inclusion of younger people within interfaith work.

### Case Study: The Inter-Cultural Leadership School (ICLS)

Aware of the emergence of ethno-religious politics in Bradford, churches sought to contribute to developing a new form of leadership which can work across religious and ethnic divides. In June 2001 two Anglicans, the Archdeacon and the Interfaith Adviser, with a Muslim colleague from the Bradford Council for Mosques, organised a conference entitled 'Shared Citizenship, Across Separating Communities: a Christian-Muslim Contribution', where convergences and divergences with regard to attitudes to politics, urban regeneration, local schooling, business and community-building were explored. Two leading policymakers, a Christian and a Muslim, were invited from each of three cities in Europe which also had growing Muslim communities – Rotterdam, Berlin and Copenhagen – to share their experiences. Local policymakers were also invited to enhance their 'religious literacy'.

A civil servant from the Council of Europe, who had responsibility for asylum and immigration work, attended the conference and suggested that as a follow up an Inter-Cultural Leadership School should be piloted in Bradford. This had been attempted in embryonic form with young professionals in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina. So the four-day residential ICLS was born with Regional Development

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<sup>3</sup> The research project cited included interviews with twenty young (18 - 31 years old) British and American Muslim interfaith advocates, discussing their religious identities in relation to their experiences of religious pluralism. The research examined concepts of commitment and conflict and was undertaken as part of Charlotte Dando's MA dissertation, supervised at SOAS, University of London.

Authority funding. Invitees were young professionals in their twenties, chosen from the majority, notionally 'Christian' communities, Asian Muslim communities, and from a third category dubbed 'humanist' (this enabled Sikh, Hindu and secular participation).

The participants were drawn from two overlapping categories: the first, those identified as actual or potential role models within their respective communities, especially for the 13-16 year-olds whom policymakers could not reach; the second category comprised professionals – police, lawyers, business people, teachers, youth workers, and fast-track young local authority employees, young clergy and imams – all of whom wanted to develop cross-cultural competences. In the four day residential school they were taught a range of skills: one day was devoted to 'religious literacy': the ICLS provided a 'safe space' to enable participants to ask all sorts of questions and to begin to craft a vocabulary to talk about difficult issues. The second day was devoted to developing conflict resolution skills; the third leadership skills and the fourth media skills.

The four days began a process to develop a new leadership at ease with religious and cultural diversity, as well as creating opportunities for friendship and trust to emerge. In the following few years an ICLS met often twice a year and developed an ongoing group of alumni – Society for Intercultural Leadership (SOIL) – and pioneered innovative projects within the city. The model was exported to other English cities and with seed money from the European Commission, was piloted in European cities, as well as Indonesia and Pakistan. The ICLS has honed a series of principles which can be downloaded from its [website](#). Near Neighbours money has been used latterly to continue the model, slightly adapted under a new name, 'Catalyst'.

#### Case Study: The Feast

Based in Birmingham, The Feast brings together young people of different faiths and cultures in friendship, to explore their own and each other's faith, and in doing so, they are changing lives and communities for the better. The Feast's staff and volunteers connect with a wide range of young people, helping them to consider the benefits and challenges of our differences. They then introduce young people of different faiths by facilitating small Youth Encounter programmes, which creating safe spaces where open and honest conversation can take place. After the experience of dialogue, and the learning and changes which happen as young people form friendships across lines of difference, The Feast supports the young people as they return to their own communities and share their new understandings.

These encounters are fun and engaging, yet look at topics of concern to young people, rather than the concerns of clergy or theologians. The Feast also supports longer-term interfaith leadership development for young people and youth leaders, through volunteer development, social action, training programmes and their Engage youth work course. The success of The Feast's programmes has recently been expanded to locations in London's Tower Hamlets, Bradford and Keighley in West Yorkshire and Luton, as well as Beirut in Lebanon.

Writing on her experience of The Feast, a year 11 student called Haleema from Birmingham wrote,

'Throughout the time I spent with other young people from other religions at events with The Feast, such as the interfaith choir, I found myself getting more confident and able to express myself in terms of my individuality and my religion. Due to my attendance at Feast events, I felt warmth spread through me whenever I discussed my faith as I could assess the similarities

and the differences between my religion, what other Muslims believed and other religions. My understanding of diversity increased with each event I went to.’<sup>4</sup>

During a recent conversation with The Feast’s CEO Tim Fawsett, he reflected on the challenges faced in supporting young leaders in the wider interfaith or community cohesion movement. These include the limited outside investment in the sector which means very few avenues for young adults to pursue interfaith work as a vocation, and the reliance on established leaders and models already in place. The interfaith movement’s recent concentration of youth leadership programmes suffers from an oft overlooked irony; there are still remarkably few young people (under thirty five) in leadership positions within the interfaith movement.

So while the two leadership programmes celebrated above, and the many others like them, are extremely encouraging, not to mention vital for the sustainability of the interfaith movement, critical evaluation ought to ask: but who will these newly trained young leaders actually lead? Where are young people playing serious leadership roles in interfaith organisations? Is space being made to encourage and support this? Are established leaders willing to listen to the new ideas and energy that these upcoming leaders can share?

When invited to a recent conference organised by a major UK interfaith organisation on the topic of youth, one interfaith coordinator asked whether he could bring some of his young leaders. He reported being told that he couldn’t bring them because it was a conference aimed at “practitioners”. A curious turn of phrase, suggesting that for some interfaith organisations, young people are not practitioners of interfaith work but rather subjects to be worked on. Engaging young people in interfaith activities can also become some kind of tick-box exercise in participation. As such, we are witnessing a gulf between the pioneering generation and the younger visionaries of the interfaith movement. This is problematic not least to the movement’s mandate on inclusiveness, but the movement is also at risk of losing fresh ideas, creativity and relevant skills to ensure that interfaith work remains relevant in contemporary contexts.

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<sup>4</sup> Haleema’s full reflection can be read at: <http://www.thefeast.org.uk/2015/03/the-feast-and-i-by-haleema/>

## Securing a future for interfaith work in the UK

### Young People

Following the comments above, the full inclusion of younger people (from teenagers to those in their early thirties) at every level, is vital for the sustainability of the interfaith movement, as well as to ensure that it remains relevant for contemporary audiences. We offer three key suggestions here:

#### 1. Suitable activities

Activities devised by older people are not always suitable to attract and engage younger audiences. In particular, the tried and tested panel session format, used so regularly by so many organisations, is often not only unengaging but is exclusionary, with many such panels made up of “expert” speakers exclusively from the older generations. In order to challenge these standard event formats, younger people, who are now more familiar with interactive methods of both formal and informal education, are those whose experience and skills might be relied on to turn this situation around. Events aimed at engaging young people ought to be developed in consultation with, or led by, young people. We considered providing a list of examples or models here, but realise that this would defeat the point being argued; the event model will vary depending on the young people involved, the context and the current social and political concerns. However, in addition to the two examples above, another successful example of interfaith work among younger people, as previously mentioned (p. 5) is one of the most successful interfaith initiatives in the USA, the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) which trains university students to develop and lead their own multifaith social action initiatives. Rather than focusing on formal dialogue and rather than relying on panels and workshops led by “elders”, IFYC focuses on the bonds of friendship which are created when people from different backgrounds act together, and when young people take the lead.

Sadly, too often there appears to be fear of trying something different, and a startling lack of evaluation or feedback after interfaith events. Interfaith leaders must find the humility to listen to new suggestions and seek new ways of engaging audiences. They must also find ways of professionalising their methods of measuring key successes.

#### 2. Full inclusion at all levels

When challenged on the role of young people, many actors in the interfaith movement retort that the reality is there simply aren't enough younger people interested in interfaith work. An easy way of dismissing a critique or ignoring a problem, but what lies at the root of this issue? Why aren't younger people engaged? And when young people do attend interfaith activities, why is it that so often they don't return or aren't keen to be further involved? Key here is the recognition that participation does not equate to inclusion. A large number of younger people interested in interfaith issues have failed to find their feet, feeling that their voices go unheard and their ability to influence has been marginalised. The only way to increase the numbers of younger people both getting involved and crucially *staying involved* in interfaith work is to seek intergenerational equity within the interfaith movement. Younger people should be included in decision making processes and leadership of organisations at every level of the interfaith movement, and this must go beyond tokenism<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> A useful tool for evaluating youth participation within an interfaith organisation (or any other organisation attempting to work with young people) is the Ladder of Youth Participation (see <http://www.freechild.org/ladder.htm>) which tracks the organisational inclusion of young people from 'manipulation' through to 'youth/adult equity'.

### 3. New forms of communication

Interfaith organisations, just like all organisations of every kind, must understand and embrace emerging forms of communications in order to remain relevant and to affectively spread key messages. Social media is crucial for engaging younger people, but, and this is very important, this must come with the recognition that running social media channels isn't the *only* thing that young people can do to help grow the interfaith movement! At a recent international conference titled, 'Interfaith Dialogue in Time of Social Media: Enabling Agents of Change, Countering Violent Extremism and Hate Speech' numerous delegates expressed their preference for face-to-face communications, dismissing the significance that digital forms of communication might have for contemporary dialogue, not to mention ignoring the expert use of social media by extremist groups such as ISIS in both their recruitment and communications. For Millennials<sup>6</sup> and younger generations of digital natives, it is not a question of one or the other, but both/and. Therefore, having social media as an added extra, something to do if you find the time, is not an option for those organisations wishing to be contemporary, relevant and growing. The emerging and future generations use various social media every single day as part of their ordinary communications – not as something set apart or something only to be engaged in if they can find the time. The way we communicate with one another is changing rapidly; the interfaith movement must keep up or will fall even further behind.

#### Leadership by minority faith groups

As mentioned above, the Church of England has not only created space of the inclusion of other religious voices in the public sphere, but also actively facilitated and funded interfaith activities and must be commended for this. However, for the most difficult conversations to happen and for people from all faith and belief backgrounds to be full engaged, we must seek a truly equal playing field whereby the Church of England does not always assume the leadership role. In reality however, the Church of England for the foreseeable future will probably continue to dominate this work for three reasons: first, as the established church in England, it has a spatial presence in every corner of the country (the parish system) unlike other Christian denominations, not to speak of the more localised presence of religious minorities largely a result of post-war labour migration; secondly, due to historic resources which support leaders – archbishops, bishops and clergy - who embody a distinctive ethos, a concern for the common good and for all within the parish, not just the regular worshippers; finally, it has a range of buildings whether Cathedrals, churches or schools to enable shared activities across religions. This does not prevent other religious minorities from pioneering interreligious initiatives. For example, members of the Jewish tradition, as mentioned already, pioneered 3FF, and the Woolf Institute in Cambridge is especially active in the field of Jewish-Christian and latterly Jewish-Muslim relations. The Muslim tradition as a significant numerical presence in Britain is a much more recent presence, with most of its resources going in to the establishment of places of worship, Islamic seminaries and charitable foundations. It is hoped that in turn, new interfaith leadership might be sparked through these new developments.

#### Lead from the bottom up

As evidenced above, there is increasing need for grassroots interfaith work of a bottom-up rather than a top-down nature. This type of work is more likely to engage younger people and women, and cuts out the need to find supportive designated "leaders" and "gatekeepers". The continuation and growth of programmes like Near Neighbours, together with programmes which do not have institutional

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<sup>6</sup> The term Millennial (also known as Generation Y) refers to those reach young adulthood around the year 2000. The term is usually used to encompass those born from around 1982 up until the mid-1990s.

religious links, are to be encouraged and further developed. This type of work may well benefit from the advice and support of structures and institutions, if and when needed.

#### Increased discussion on difference

As Archbishop Welby argued, interfaith dialogue must go beyond noting similarities and move to the more difficult question of difference. Interfaith dialogue can sometimes create extremely polite spaces, filled with well-meaning people, where selected scripture is shared in order to reveal how alike each religion is. Interfaith activist and Harvard Professor Diana Eck speaks of 'energetic engagement with diversity' and 'the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference' (Eck, 1993: Ch 7). When interfaith work focuses on similarities alone, we do not cross those lines of difference. In some cases we don't even acknowledge that such lines exist. When interfaith work heads down the path of a "we're all the same really" philosophy, this kind of thinking not only ignores the phenomenal and rich histories, the intricate and established practices, and the most deeply held convictions of each and every religious tradition and every individual of faith, but it also misses an opportunity for spiritual growth, for deeper understanding and for mutual transformation. But in order to do this, first, truly safe spaces must be facilitated and truly inclusive forms of interfaith work must be fostered. The radical humility of the best interfaith interactions means that this work may open up a new way of understanding difference; it might allow us to see difference differently.

## Final Thoughts

There is a rich history of religious and cultural difference in the UK, and a tradition of building bridges and joining together as a community to celebrate diversity. The interfaith movement began in earnest in Britain around a hundred years ago and can take heart from many successes. In his most recent work, the previous Chief Rabbi - now Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks - points to dramatic improvements in Jewish-Christian relations after the tragedy of the Holocaust. 'The result has been dramatic. Today, after an estrangement that lasted two millennia, Jews and Christians meet much more often as friends – even (in the words selected by recent popes) 'brothers' – than as enemies' (Sacks, 2015:25).

However, Lord Sacks's book was triggered by the terrible upsurge in religiously motivated terrorist attacks since the beginning of the new millennium and suggests ways out of the present morass. The sheer scale of the atrocities he documents beggars belief. 'In November 2014, for example, there were 664 jihadist attacks in 14 countries, killing a total of 5,042 people ...[and] Muslims form the majority of victims of Islamist violence' (Sacks, 2015: 5-7). Sacks continues:

A century ago Christians made up 20 percent of the population of the Middle East. Today the figure is 4 per cent. What is happening is the religious equivalent of ethnic cleansing. It is one of the crimes against humanity in our time. (Sacks, 2015: 7).

It would be idle to pretend that such realities have not begun to impact interreligious relations in the UK. Increasingly, one meets with scepticism about the value of interfaith work in Christian circles – not to speak of Muslim circles, where it has always been a precarious and fragile development. At the same time, religious literacy is in decline (Burrell, 2013), while incidences of religious intolerance such as antisemitism (Henley, 2014) and Islamophobia are rising. Further, the number of young British people turning to religious extremism should also be of concern.

This raises sharply what the strengths and weaknesses of the interfaith movement are. More pertinently, what specific contribution it might make in this present climate of uncertainty and an apparent growing lack of trust. It remains well positioned to teach and challenge in such key areas as religious literacy and the breaking down of religious stereotypes. But, as Archbishop Welby intimated, the interfaith movement must also be seen to be enabling the hard conversations without which it will haemorrhage credibility. However, there needs to be an honest recognition of what it cannot do. It should not be seen as part of the government's Prevent agenda. It is not the answer to violent extremism. It can and must, however, continue to reach out the hand of friendship, especially to Muslims who are increasingly feeling beleaguered.

The interfaith movement needs to continue, with the help of initiatives such as Near Neighbours, to engage in localised, social action programmes. Yet far too few interfaith organisations are devising new programmes, reaching new funding streams or innovating ways to reach new audiences. Without attempts to pioneer new ways of communication and the full inclusion of young leaders within the movement, this is unlikely to change.

## Reflection

Q. Have you experienced successful or unsuccessful interfaith activities? What do you think it was about these activities which made them a success/unsuccessful?

Q. What do you think is the future of the interfaith movement in the UK? Do we need interfaith work? Why?

Q. How could interfaith work be made more inclusive and attractive for younger people?

Q. Should interfaith dialogue place more emphasis on exploring differences rather than similarities?

Q. Considering questions of difference and power, what role should the Church of England play in the facilitation of interfaith work in the UK?

Q. Are robust bi-lateral relations - for example the Council of Christians and Jews, Christian Muslim Forum etc. - a necessary condition for healthy multi-cultural relations?

Q. Can improved interfaith relations help to increase intra-faith and ecumenical relations?

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