

## THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK

### MINUTES OF VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE FAITH COMMUNITIES FORUM

at 2.30pm on Thursday 18 February 2021

by Zoom

**Co-Moderators:** The Rt Revd Jonathan Clark; and Mr Malcolm Deboo.

**Present:** Mrs Josephine Backus (Network of Buddhist Organisations (UK)); Dr Desmond Biddulph CBE (The Buddhist Society); Mr Mohinder Singh Chana (Network of Sikh Organisations (UK)); Ms Siriol Davies (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland/Churches Together in England); Major Samuel Edgar (Salvation Army); Minister David Hopkins (Spiritualists' National Union); Ms Prudence Jones (Pagan Federation); Mr Hassan Joudi (Muslim Council of Britain); the Revd Dr Reynaldo Leao-Nato (Methodist Church in Britain); the Revd Tracey Lewis (The United Reformed Church in the UK); Mr Kesh Morjaria (BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha UK); Mr Dapo Ogunrinde (Council of African and Afro-Caribbean Churches (UK)); Mr Neil Pitchford (Druid Network); Ms Tracey Prior (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints); Venerable Bogoda Seelawimala (Sri Lankan Sangha Sabha of GB); Dr Natubhai Shah MBE (Jain Network); Mr Vinay Shah (Institute of Jainology and FCF Moderator); Dr Vinaya Sharma (Vishwa Hindu Parishad (UK)); Mr Anthony Silkoff (Board of Deputies of British Jews); Lord Singh of Wimbledon CBE (Network of Sikh Organisations (UK)); Professor Dr Paul Weller (Inter Faith Working Group of the Baptist Union of Great Britain); Mr Karl Wightman (National Spiritual Assembly of Baha'is); and Lynda Williams (Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations).

**Apologies:** Hindu Council (UK); and Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board.

**Moderator apologies:** Minister David Hopkins.

**In attendance:** Mr Ashley Beck; Mrs Hannah Cassidy; Dr Harriet Crabtree; and Dr David Hampshire (Inter Faith Network for the UK).

Mr Pete Benton (Office for National Statistics) [for Agenda Item 7]

#### **FCF ToRs and nature of minutes**

A copy of the Terms of Reference of the Faith Communities Forum of IFN (FCF) is at <https://www.interfaith.org.uk/about/governance>.

The minutes of the main sessions of the meeting of the FCF are made available beyond the FCF on the basis agreed by it in May 2017. The minutes follow FCF's agreed style: namely, points made by individuals are noted in the minutes and have the status of views of the individual who is present on behalf of their member organisation; any points agreed by the meeting are clearly identified as such. Comments are unattributed except where from the Chair or where the Executive Director or another staff member has been asked to give input or to provide a point of information, or in particular contexts where the contributor has explicitly asked that their identity be noted. Within FCF meetings there is

a chance for all bodies to contribute. Contributors carry responsibility for the accuracy of their contributions. Views expressed by contributors are not endorsed by IFN.

### **Agenda Item 1: Welcome and apologies**

1. Mr Malcolm Deboo, in the chair, welcomed those present.
2. A period of silence was observed, keeping in mind all those working for inter faith understanding and cooperation particularly in the context of COVID-19.
3. He explained, for the benefit of new members, that the Faith Communities Forum was a forum for member bodies of IFN in the category of national faith community representative body. It was a forum for discussion of current issues of interest and concern rather than a decision or statement making body. It enabled sharing of views and good practice and networking.
4. Screenshots of the meeting might be used by IFN on social media. Anyone wishing not to be included within these, should indicate. In keeping with the FCF's decision about the nature of minutes, apart from IFN matters, the relevant section of the minutes would be available to the public (unless the FCF request a closed session). Minutes would, as usual, summarise points, and these would be unattributed except for a general reference to a faith community where the community of the speaker was relevant to understanding the point.
5. Apologies were noted.

### **INTER FAITH NETWORK MATTERS SESSION**

[Paragraphs 6 to 14]

### **Agenda Item 5: COVID-19 and faith communities**

#### a) Vaccination programme

15. Dr Crabtree drew attention to the information in the Background Note. She said that faith communities had played a vital role in the vaccination programme, from hosting vaccination centres in their places of worship to tackling misinformation.
16. In discussion the following points and questions were raised:
  - *The Guardian* newspaper was reporting that a significant percentage of people in Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities had not taken up the offer of a vaccination. This was surprising. The participant had not personally come across anyone in their community (the Hindu community) who did not wish to have the vaccine, once it had been clarified that it did not contain any animal products.
  - Another participant also found this puzzling. He was not aware of any instances in the Sikh community where there had been a reluctance to take up the vaccine. It was frustrating that BAME communities were always referred to as one group. It would be better to identify individual communities and to address the issues accordingly.
  - The vaccination figures used by *The Guardian* were from the NHS England website. The data on the website was broken down by ethnicity.

- The Institute of Jainology had been keeping the Jain community up to date and trying to tackle misinformation about the vaccines. OneJain, an initiative of the Institute of Jainology, had been holding webinars for people to voice concerns and ask questions about the vaccinations. Representatives of the British Asian Trust and the Minister in charge of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout had answered questions.
- There had been some anecdotal reports about Pagans in Cornwall being reluctant to take the vaccine because they preferred to rely on having a strong immune system, but these reports had not been verified. The side effects of the vaccine were much less than the symptoms of COVID-19 so it was better to have the vaccine.
- Many faith communities were promoting uptake of the vaccine on social media, not just for the benefit of their own members but for the benefit of wider society.
- The Zoroastrian community was very supportive of the vaccination rollout. One of the concerns had been not only the rollout of vaccinations in the UK but also to the rest of the world, especially the poorer countries. The Serum Institute in India was run by a Zoroastrian father and son. They had been working with the Oxford/Astra Zeneca vaccine. It was hoped that the teething problems across the world would soon be resolved so many populations could be vaccinated and everyone could return to meeting face to face.
- The BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha had participated in two webinars held by Brent Council. At the first one doctors had addressed the questions posed by the general public. Brent Council had also arranged a separate webinar for the Hindu community at which doctors had addressed concerns. The temple premises and school opposite had been used as vaccination centres. BAPS had been providing information to its members on how to register for their vaccinations. There were often slots available at the end of the day. BAPS had also been running a public health awareness campaign and produced videos on how to stay healthy during the pandemic. These videos had been shared widely across all communities.
- In Southwark, in South London, the majority ethnicities were Black with West African heritage or Caribbean heritage and also dual heritage. There seemed to be more people who were anxious about the vaccination than were confident about it. There were real concerns about trust which needed to be heard and addressed. There were historical reasons for a lack of trust, particularly distrust in the health services, for black and brown people in the area. It was important to address the issues behind the concerns. The situation involved the whole community – everyone wanted everyone else to be vaccinated as well because it affected the whole community. Other issues within these communities, such as a much lower life expectancy, a higher rate of being held under Mental Health Act, a higher rate of forced medication, and lower and poorer health outcomes did not get much attention. But when the issue affected the more privileged areas of community, such as vaccination, then everyone was concerned that all parts of the community should have it. The concern should, however, be wider than that. There was a need to look at inequalities in health outcomes and to commit to work towards greater equality. The local council was doing interesting work listening to small groups in the community, hearing what their real concerns were.
- Issues that specifically affected Black communities needed engaging with properly.
- There were deep-seated issues of racial justice.
- The root causes of concerns needed to be understood. The issues, rather than the symptoms, should be treated.

- The Muslim Council of Britain had been holding webinars about the vaccination programme. The British Islamic Medical Association had produced useful mythbusters, which had now been translated into several different community languages. <https://britishima.org/operation-vaccination/hub/covidmyths/>
- It was absurd to link non-white communities as 'BAME communities'. This camouflaged rather than helped. Many care home workers were from Afro-Caribbean communities where it was understood that take up of the vaccine was sometimes as low as 20%, yet relatives, who had been vaccinated, were not allowed to visit.
- It was important to address concerns. There had been a recent drive in the ultra orthodox Jewish community in North London and many had now taken up the vaccine offer.
- There was a lack of clarity in terms of the path of faith leaders being vaccinated. It would be helpful for faith leaders to be prioritised soon within the vaccination rollout. This would be an opportunity for those leaders to show their faith communities that the vaccine was a very important part of moving forward. There seemed to be a reticence from public health bodies to this idea.

b) Faith communities and Communications during the pandemic

17. No points were offered.

c) Community assistance work

18. No points were offered.

**Agenda Item 6: Freedom of expression in relation to religion or belief**

19. Bishop Clark welcomed Lord Singh of Wimbledon, Director of the Network of Sikh Organisations (UK). It was very good that he was able to join the meeting to address this important issue of freedom of expression in relation to religion or belief. He drew attention to the background information in Annex B to the Background Note, noting that there had been a fair amount of conversation around this matter since the end of 2019. The Annex set out the timeline of the process that had been followed. [A copy of the Annex is included at the end of these minutes for ease of reference.] There was a wider issue which was still due to be on the FCF's agenda for when such matters became possible again, to look at relationships between faith communities and media organisations and the possibility of an event to explore those issues. That could not be taken forward at present during the 'emergency mode' created by the pandemic. That did not, however, prevent the FCF from reflecting together and from hearing from Lord Singh.

20. Lord Singh thanked IFN for inviting him to speak to the meeting. A transcript of the personal reflections and views he offered is below:

"Some 30 years ago Brian Pearce, a senior civil servant, brought his diplomatic skills into setting up the Inter Faith Network to increase understanding and cooperation between different faiths. I was privileged to be able to join Bishop Jim Thompson, Rabbi Hugo Gryn and Pandit Sharma in this. It was the first time that faiths were working together nationally. There was no Government funding and we were relying entirely on voluntary donations. We worked closely with the Commission for Racial Equality to fight racism and question aspects of

Government policy. We were instrumental in getting religious affiliation included in the 2001 Census, in getting the faith zone at the Millennium Dome and agreeing on key values for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and organising a Service of Remembrance and Reconciliation in the Queen's Gallery of the House of Lords – which the Prime Minister at the time, Tony Blair, described as the most moving celebration of the Millennium that he had witnessed.

Then we began to get Government funding and with it a reluctance to take the lead in tackling injustice in society. Planned statements are routinely issued condemning recurring atrocities linked to religion with no attempts to tackle the way dated religious texts are manipulated to justify the killing of innocents. There is no linkage. It is like discussing and sympathising with the victims of COVID-19. We sympathise again and again but make no attempt to look at the underlying causes, what is the cause and how can it be prevented. No attempt is now made in inter faith meetings to understand one another's religions and build on commonalities and explore differences and learn how we can accommodate to those. In exploring commonality, we would find out if we cared to look, that there is much more in common than there is difference. But we don't. We keep different religions compartmentalised. 'Yes, we will work together but don't let's talk about each other's religion.' Why not?

Supporting the right to freedom of belief should be central to the work of the Inter Faith Network. Some two years ago, some Christian fundamentalists tried to prevent me doing a *Thought for the Day* on the Martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur. That is a key Sikh festival. It is listed on the Inter Faith Network website as a key festival. He was martyred for giving his life furthering tolerance and respect for the freedom of belief of those of another faith. *The Times* criticised the belief of those of the BBC in a front page headline and a lead editorial. *The Mail on Sunday* did much the same thing as did other newspapers. Christian, Hindu, Baha'i, Shi'a and Sunni leaders wrote to the BBC protesting against this attempted censorship. From the Inter Faith Network, nothing. A voice was not raised from this august body. When Inter Faith Network Trustee Mohinder Singh Chana tried to get this attack on freedom of belief discussed in the Inter Faith Network room there was always something against it. My friends, the Inter Faith Network I helped to found would have been foremost on speaking up for the rights of freedom and belief for others, as Guru Tegh Bahadur did. In my final talk on *Thought for the Day* I spoke up for persecuted Christians in the Middle East. Paraphrasing the Bible, I conclude by saying, 'What profiteth the Inter Faith Network in gaining Government funding if it is silent on freedom of belief?' I am stopping here because of shortage of time but would welcome another opportunity to discuss the wider issues of freedom of expression. We need to know where the boundaries are. We need to gain confidence in talking about one another's religions."

21. Bishop Clark thanked Lord Singh for his reflections and invited questions and comments, noting that some FCF members would have been around at the time discussions around the matter began and others would not. In discussion the following questions and comments were raised. A response from Lord Singh is shown in italics.

- A participant, who noted that he had not been an FCF member at the time, was sorry to hear about the situation as described by Lord Singh. Being together was not about sharing the same faith, but about solidarity and support for one another, for example in the face of a lack of freedom of expression of faith or of persecution.

- For those outside religion, including the media, there was a lot of fear of religious issues. Perhaps the BBC could have got the two involved parties together and there could then have been a joint statement from them. Faith communities could make a difference by standing together. It was understandable that IFN had not made a statement about the matter. It was the two organisations involved that needed to come together to make a statement. Sometimes, when dealing with the media, there was a need to prove fairness and impartiality. The only way to do that was for both parties to agree on a way for the matter to be addressed in a balanced way. Fear often stopped people engaging. IFN was very good at enabling people to come together to stand in solidarity. It also offered an opportunity for people to say when something might be found offensive and to offer alternatives.

*The Inter Faith Network singularly failed to make any comment. The two parties involved were the BBC and the Sikh community. The BBC with one hand said that Lord Singh's [my] contributions were the voice of tolerance in intolerant times and at same time they defend the right of a producer to censor Sikh teachings. That is not right. The Inter Faith Network is quick to condemn atrocities, even minor or major ones, they are all bad. But why the total silence from the Inter Faith Network on this issue over more than a year?*

22. Dr Crabtree said that the Annex (to the Background Note for the meeting) covered the journey of what had been discussed and the response, including the different steps taken by the Co-Chairs at the time and the meeting of the FCF Moderators. A very significant issue had been brought forward for discussion. There were two separate issues involved: one was the handling of matters relating to the BBC situation and whether IFN could or should have taken the BBC to task and asked it to account for itself. The second was a more general, crucial point, which Lord Singh had raised about the boundaries of what could be said about people's histories or religions from the perspective of another religious community or more generally. That was the matter that she had understood was being taken forward following careful conversation with Mr Mohinder Singh Chana and others. It was a big issue and did need looking at in greater detail.
23. Lord Singh said that before IFN had started receiving Government funding, it had criticised the BBC when it stepped off mark in insulting different religions. Then statements were issued. Now IFN was silent when the BBC and other institutions did this. Regarding the greater issue of freedom of expression, this was something that IFN should have tackled years ago. It was no good just coming together, meeting about particular subjects and so on. The basic thing was understanding one another and supporting one another, as religions, in a common ethical push to make society better. IFN was behaving like society outside, where it is said, "Don't talk about religion". It was saying, "Don't talk about one another's religion. Let's all pretend to be good and believe in what we are saying". The result of that he saw leading to a two-faced approach where he had examples of people saying nice, pleasant things about one another, but then going back into their own communities and saying unpleasant things.
24. Bishop Clark said that IFN had a carefully formed policy on making statements, into which this particular issue did not fit. In an immediate situation an organisation could not just re-write its policy if that was what was needed in order to respond to the situation differently. There were some structural factors about the way in which IFN

had decided to work over the years which had created the context for what had been experienced.

25. In further discussion the following points were made. Responses from Lord Singh are in italics.

- The *Thought for the Day* producer might have misunderstood Lord Singh's talk as attacking Muslims for their attitudes towards Hinduism a few hundred years ago, rather than as giving Sikhism as an illustration of championing tolerance and mutual dialogue. In that case, a discussion between the producer and Lord Singh would have been much more appropriate. Ignorance and fear often made people over cautious about what could be said in the public forum. It was not clear what kind of statement IFN could have made about the matter.  
*"Would the BBC have made a similar attempt to stop a Christian speaking about Easter because that involved the crucifixion of Jesus Christ at the hands of oppression from the Jewish community?"*
- The Romans, who were Pagans, were also involved. [Pagan participant responding to Lord Singh's point.]
- One issue which had been raised related to sensitivities and being on one's best behaviour in public and then letting one's guard down afterwards.
- It was important to understand that many religions were born together with some element of conflict and often that conflict could be translated down into feelings of worry or sensitivity across religions in the modern day. That needed a lot of resolution, sensitivity and working together. It might be helpful for IFN to think about a discussion with the BBC. There was a need to be very, very careful about how possibilities in different religions were compared together. For example, the reference to speaking about Easter being banned because of Jewish oppression at the time, might be heard in a worried manner by Jewish people. It was difficult to express feelings about, for example, a Sikh festival, if one was not from the Sikh community. Christianity and Judaism had, in a sense, built a closer relationship because they had been able to put issues in the past, so that they did not affect current relationships. Vatican II had been very important and the Church of England had done a lot of work recently on this as well. That was where the work lay between different religions and between faith communities and institutions within society. [Contribution from Jewish participant]
- In one way or another all faith communities' histories had certain issues that had to be tackled. If they were not tackled within strict parameters, people could become defensive and then close up, which meant that nothing further was gained. For these discourses to work, the moderators had to be skilled and knowledgeable in handling these sensitive issues especially within the inter faith arena. In addition, even before raising these delicate issues, there was a need to recognise how far friendships had developed and, consequently, whether it was possible to be candid or whether there was a need to be diplomatic all the time. If the nuances were not handled carefully then all that had been achieved through hard work across a number of years could just crumble. Zoroastrians, as one of the smallest religions in the world, were aware of these sensitivities. They had learned that when issues were brought up, the recipient had to be willing to listen with an open mind without being on the defensive.
- The Inter Faith Network, as its code of practice, needed to examine its boundaries and be more proactive and not be on the defensive side all the time and the Board needed to dwell on this. If there was something wrong that was going on, then it needed to have the courage to say that. [Mohinder Singh Chana – referred to at paragraphs 20 and 22 above.]

26. Dr Crabtree said that 3 different issues seemed to be emerging:
- Firstly, the importance of calling out negative or ignorant media coverage. That might be the role of IFN alone or of a range of different bodies. Lord Singh was right that IFN had done a lot more of this at certain points in the past when nobody else was doing so. It might still be appropriate to do it. It would be more or less a regular role calling for additional staff and a policy on this, because, as those of all faiths present knew, sadly, there was a great deal of misinformation and frequently much unpleasantness and ignorance to be found in some coverage.
  - Secondly, IFN's locus for getting involved in a disagreement over what had happened in the handling of an issue such as the one referred to by Lord Singh. Much of that was covered by the material in the Annex.
  - Thirdly, the very important question of freedom of expression and where the boundaries lay.

It would be useful to take forward from this, a way to build on the process that had already been followed with great care, including looking with great seriousness at the important point that Lord Singh had raised about how one handled the issue of freedom of expression in relation to other religions, and also to ask the Board to look again at IFN's current way of dealing with media coverage that was considered inappropriate, lacking or ignorant. It might be that IFN needed to readdress that and reconsider its role. That would be for the Board to discuss.

27. Lord Singh thanked everyone for their contributions and said that the important point was to move forward and the procedures should allow this. If someone jumped on his foot he did not have to consider whether he had the locus and ways of saying "Ouch"; he said "Ouch". This was what the Inter Faith Network should have done. It should have said [to the BBC], "This is not on, criticising a clear teaching of tolerance and respect for other religions, trying to censor that. That is not on." On freedom of expression, he would be willing to write a paper on that to help any discussion in the future.

28. Bishop Clark thanked Lord Singh again and everyone for their contributions. As the Executive Director had indicated, IFN would be continuing to reflect on the matter as part of continuing to improve its work.

*Mr Pete Benton joined the meeting.*

### **Agenda Item 7: 2021 Census**

29. Bishop Clark welcomed Mr Pete Benton, Director of Population and Public Policy Operations, Office for National Statistics.

30. Mr Pete Benton thanked IFN for inviting him to speak to the meeting. He offered the following points:

- ONS is grateful for IFN's help with the Census.
- The Census was first held in 1801. ONS is responsible for the Census in England and Wales. Northern Ireland is carrying out a Census at the same time. Scotland has delayed its Census by a year because of the pandemic. It is a legal requirement to complete the Census.
- The Census provides vital information about communities and is used as the basis for planning for the coming 10 years. Getting an accurate count of every



community, whether defined by religion, country of birth, language or ethnicity, is fundamental to getting a snapshot of life in the UK.

- We are keen to work with faith groups in every possible way. ONS has already had the support of a number of faith groups. For example, I was on the Akaal Sikh television channel last week and I was delighted that the whole community was talking about the need to take part in the Census. I recorded a video for the Ahimsa Day celebrations with the Jain community.
- The Census provides information that is used by local authorities to develop local plans, for example for housing and health services, and also to monitor equalities and discrimination, whether in relation to employment or health or overcrowded houses. The best way for people to be seen and understood is to complete the Census. ONS would welcome the support of faith communities in this.
- The 2021 Census takes place on Sunday 21 March. Every household will shortly be receiving a postcard with information explaining how to take part. In the first two weeks of March every household will then receive a letter with further information.
- The Census will, for the first time, be primarily online. The letter will provide the unique access code to complete the form online for each individual address. If anyone needs a paper copy of the questionnaire, they are available and, in some areas, for example where there is low broadband uptake, addresses will receive a paper copy automatically.
- There is plenty of support available. ONS has 300 community engagement staff (Census Engagement Managers and Community Advisers), who are working with every local authority, developing a local partnership plan and using the best of each local authority's networks. The census engagement managers and community advisers are engaging with as many local groups as possible. ONS has asked them to make contact with every local place of worship to seek the support of local communities.
- The Census material has been produced in 50 languages. Many of the community advisers speak particular languages. ONS is keen for the field staff, who will support the operation, to come from local communities.
- ONS will be recruiting about 30,000 field staff. After the Census date, they will knock on the doors of people who have not yet completed their forms. They will maintain social distancing, without entering the property. More information on the field staff roles is at <https://www.censusjobs.co.uk/>. ONS would be very pleased to have the support of faith communities to get local communities engaged and taking part in the Census.
- ONS also has a Census Helpline with translation services for anyone who needs assistance. Depending on whether lockdown restrictions have been lifted, there will also be local Census Support Centres. Because of the pandemic the ONS will not have the same ability to engage in face to face events as it has done in the past. Previously, for example, staff have gone to places of worship and helped people on the spot to fill in their forms. So, the ONS is also seeking the help of faith communities to spread the word, whether at a service or in a newsletter.
- Sometimes people are worried that Census information is not confidential. ONS does not share identifiable data from the Census with anybody. It is kept for 100 years. Identifiable information will never be shared with, for example, Government, a local community, or Immigration Services. So, nobody can be impacted directly by giving Census information. It is important to emphasise that as much as possible. In 220 years there has never been a breach of Census information.

- The community engagement managers and community advisers have been doing interviews on local radio and have had hundreds of articles in newsletters.
- ONS has been working across the last few years at a national level through its Diversity Advisory Group, in which a number of FCF members take part and they have been spreading the word about the census taking place.
- Now is the time to mobilise communities locally to help one another. A lot of people have been helped to use technology across the last year. For some people it can be very helpful to have someone they know and trust to help them by telephone to complete the form online.
- In summary, the Census is vital for everyone. Once ONS can produce statistics that cross-tabulate religion, ethnicity, language, country of birth, national identity, employment, housing, health, occupation and many other areas, it provides a rich picture of local communities. But this all depends on people completing the questionnaire.

Mr Benton also noted that:

- Every Government Department has a Director who is a 'Faith and Belief Champion' and I am one. ONS won the Faith and Belief Inclusion Award for its activities during the last Inter Faith Week. ONS very much enjoyed Inter Faith Week.

31. Bishop Clark thanked Mr Benton for his presentation and invited questions and comments. In discussion the following questions and comments were raised. Responses from Mr Benton are in italics.

- What is the difference between national identity and nationality? And what does ethnicity mean?

*Ethnicity, national identity and identity are multifaceted and complex. It has taken 30 years to develop the current suite of questions in the Census. Ethnicity brings together a number of elements of race, culture and geography, including skin colour and geographic descent. A question on religion was added to the Census in 2001, which is voluntary. Nationality and national identity questions were added in 2011. Nationality is about citizenship and relates to what passports you hold. National identity is a question based on self perception. For the national identity question there are tick boxes to mark, for example, Welsh or English, but there is also a 'write-in' box for people to add whatever they wish. The Cornish community, for example, want to be able to say that they are Cornish. The ONS has been supporting that and will produce statistics about the Cornish community. Each question has been heavily tested to ensure that it is clear. The Census is not yet live but you can find a link to the questions on our website. [www.census.gov.uk](http://www.census.gov.uk)*

- Does the question on religion have a 'write-in' box? Most members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (CJCLDS) identify as Christian. This, however, means that there is not accurate data on the number of CJCLDS members. There is also an issue over whether others consider CJCLDS members to be Christians. Can another item be added to the tick list?

*There is a tick box list which includes 'other' and then a 'write-in' box for people to add their religion if it is not listed. The questions have already been finalised. It is, however, not too late for CJCLDS to put out a message telling their members to write CJCLDS into the 'Other' box, so that the number can be recorded. The ONS can support CJCLDS in doing this.*

- Some people find reading and writing a challenge and will need extra help.

*The ONS is aware of this and has therefore increased the capacity for people to complete the questionnaire over the telephone. Information can be taken confidentially over the phone with them and a translation service is included.*

- The Spiritualists' National Union has included an article about the Census in its most recent magazine, encouraging its members to complete the questionnaire and to note that they are Spiritualists, so that the numbers can be recorded.  
*That is very helpful. I am happy to come and speak with any faith community TV or radio stations over the next few weeks.*
- How can we get in touch with ONS about the Census?  
*Anyone wishing to be in touch can let the IFN office know and they can pass on information to Lara Phelan in the ONS Community Engagement Team.*

32. Dr Crabtree said that IFN had very much appreciated the participation of ONS in Inter Faith Week and the Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion approach had been very important and contributed to the enabling of greater religious literacy across the Civil Service. Mr Benton said that raising religious literacy across the Civil Service was an ongoing piece of work, as was building bridges between different religious groups and across faith and diversity groups. IFN's support had been very helpful.

33. Bishop Clark thanked Mr Benton again for his presentation.

*Mr Benton left the meeting.*

#### **Agenda Item 8: Inter faith engagement and joint work of faith communities**

34. Bishop Clark said that no information had been submitted in advance for this Agenda Item. No updates were offered.

#### **Agenda Item 9: Other current issues of interest or concern to faith communities**

35. Bishop Clark reminded members that this Agenda Item offered an opportunity to raise current issues of interest or concern to faith communities in the UK. Members had been asked to notify issues in advance and none had been raised.

36. A participant drew attention to a recently published report, *State of Hate: Far-Right Extremism in Europe*, which dealt with levels of racism throughout Europe. This might be of interest to FCF members. It could be found at [www.hopenothate.org.uk](http://www.hopenothate.org.uk).

#### **Agenda Item 10: Date of next meeting**

37. Dr Crabtree said that there had been wide-ranging input at the present meeting. FCF meeting minutes usually had an IFN business session that was not made public and a more general session that was publicly available. As usual, IFN would follow the agreement that, for the most part, comments were unattributed except where context made attribution desirable. Background information was sometimes attached where necessary and might be in this instance.

38. Bishop Clark thanked everyone for attending and for their contributions. He noted that a date for the next meeting would be circulated in due course.

23 April 2021

**NOTE ON BACKGROUND TO AGENDA ITEM 6**

1. In response to the statement issued on 10 October 2019 by IFN's Co-Chairs and Moderators, in the context of likely impact on inter faith relations in the UK, following the attack in Halle, Germany, the IFN office received an email from Lord Singh of Wimbledon of the Network of Sikh Organisations asking whether a statement was going to be issued "condemning the BBC's action in trying to censor a TFTD [Thought for the Day] on the martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur who was publicly beheaded for his brave stance on tolerance and freedom of belief for all."
2. The IFN office was in touch with the Co-Chairs about this, and also with the Co-Moderator, Mr Malcolm Deboo. After careful consideration, their view was that an urgent statement on the matter was not within the parameters of IFN's Policy on Making of Statements (which had been reviewed, and reaffirmed by the Board on 23 September following consultation with the FCF). They wrote to Lord Singh on 21 October. In their email they offered to meet with Lord Singh if he wished to have an urgent statement and also invited him to speak to a forthcoming FCF meeting about the matter.
3. An exchange of emails followed between the IFN office and Mohinder Singh Chana, as IFN's Moderator from the Sikh Community and, later, Lord Singh. Lord Singh requested that the matter be put on the Agenda for an FCF meeting.
4. Lord Singh was invited to attend the meeting of the FCF Moderators on 21 November to speak about the matter but was not able to attend. At that meeting, following discussion, the Moderators agreed the following points:
  - A significant issue of principle relating to freedom to speak about one's religion had been raised by Lord Singh; the Moderators took that very seriously.
  - Issuing of an urgent matters statement on this matter of principle was not seen by the Moderators as consonant with IFN's Policy on Making of Statements.
  - As the Policy on Making of Statements said, the absence of a statement does not signal a lack of concern by IFN about an issue. That was very much true in the present case.
  - The Moderators took the view that an appropriate expression of their concern would be for IFN to arrange an opportunity for mutual learning between faith communities and media organisations in relation to the ways in which faith communities speak and are spoken of in the public square. The Moderators asked the Co-Chairs to begin, with the support of the office, a process of exploring possibilities for such an event, letting the Board know of this (with agreement to a conference of course being subject to the Board's agreement).
  - The Moderators underlined the importance of all faith communities represented within the UK having a voice in public debate. They noted that it was an essential part of IFN's nature as a multi faith organisation that it reflected that approach within its work.
5. At the meeting of the Moderators on 21 November copies were made available of an email that had been received from Mr Mohinder Singh Chana on 20 November. The invitation in that had been to sign, on a personal basis, a letter of support for the position of Lord Singh in relation to the Thought For The Day matter. On 24

November a new version of the letter had been received from Mr Chana and was subsequently circulated to Moderators for them to sign in a personal capacity if they wished to do so.

6. In the course of discussion by the Executive Director with Mr Singh Chana (IFN's Moderator from the Sikh Community and an IFN Board member) following the email from Lord Singh of 10 October, a question arose about whether IFN's Policy on Making of Statements should again be looked at to see whether there was a gap in terms of possible statements which might not be of the urgency of, for example, responding to a terrorist attack, but were more urgent than the kind of FCF statement described within the policy. At their meeting on 21 November the Moderators noted that this had been raised and wished that this be looked at by the Board, most likely in their first meeting of 2020. The Board agreed to do so. COVID-19 led to a delay in doing so. It also affected taking further forward some further possible steps in exploring the topic, including through a possible conference (subject to resources).
7. Lord Singh was invited to speak to the Faith Communities Forum on 12 February 2020, the last meeting before the pandemic. However, other diary commitments prevented that.
8. Prior to its meeting on 11 December 2019, as a basis for consideration of ways forward, the Board, received an email from the then Co-Chairs which included the following material which may be useful for the FCF to have, now that the topic in question has come to the agenda of the FCF.

“As you may be aware, in the news recently was a disagreement between a BBC Radio 4 Thought for the Day presenter (Lord Singh) and the BBC over a piece about Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth of the ten gurus of Sikhism, who fought against the forced conversion of Hindus to Islam under one of the Mughal emperors of India in the 17th century (and was subsequently executed for that and for his own refusal to convert). Lord Singh believed strongly that the BBC was attempting to prevent him talking about this for fear that offence might be caused to Muslims. While the BBC did not accept a complaint that he subsequently lodged, the discussion about this issue raises some important general questions.

Many religious traditions have, in their scriptures or in their foundational narratives about episodes in their history, references to the beliefs of other religious traditions and actions of some of the members of those. That is especially the case where a religious tradition's early community emerged in a context where other religious traditions were already practised – for example Christians in the context of the Judaism of the period and of the nexus of different beliefs and philosophies of the Roman Empire; Muslims in the context of Christian and Jewish and other traditions present in the Arabian peninsula and other areas; Baha'is in the context of Islam, Zoroastrianism and other faiths in the then Persia; or Sikhs in the context of the traditions present at that time in India.

For members of the different faiths, these parts of scriptures or foundational historical narratives are part of their tradition. The question of how best one talks about such material varies depending on its nature. There cannot be an expectation of faith communities that they excise particular scriptural teachings or be required not to mention periods in their history where they resisted persecution of themselves and other groups. At the same time, careful explanation of context is very important. Thus, for example, the

Council of Christians and Jews has worked for many decades to help Christians and Jews understand the context of the references to Jews in the Christian New Testament and to seek to ensure that these and non-scriptural historical Christian texts do not feed into a negative view of Jews. Its work is a valuable resource.

A particular issue arises where there are very brief pieces about religions, for example in the media or other settings as civic events where there may not always be time to ensure that an audience understands the full context. In such circumstances, there can be a risk that caution on the part of broadcasters or event holders leads to an over focus on teachings and historical narratives that are perceived to have a lower likelihood of causing offence to some of the audience. There are some comparable issues in relation to handling of contemporary events.”

17 February 2021