

## THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK

### MINUTES OF SPECIAL SESSION OF THE FAITH COMMUNITIES FORUM

at 10.15am on Wednesday 27 May 2020

by Zoom

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

**Present:** Bishop Dr Joe Aldred (Churches Together in England); Dr Desmond Biddulph CBE (Buddhist Society); Marigold Bentley (Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations); Mr Simon Bland (General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches); the Revd Philip Brooks (The United Reformed Church in the UK); Minister David Bruton (Spiritualists' National Union); Dr Deesha Chadha (Hindu Forum of Britain); Mr Mohinder Singh Chana (Network of Sikh Organisations (UK)); Mr Peter Colwell (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland); Ms Siriol Davies (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland); the Revd Dr Paul Goodliff (Churches Together in England); Ms Prudence Jones (Pagan Federation); Mr Hassan Joudi (Muslim Council of Britain); Mr Rajnish Kashyap (Hindu Council (UK)); Ms Sabira Lakha (World Ahlul-Bayt Islamic League); the Revd Dr Reynaldo F Leao-Neto (Methodist Church in Britain); Mr John Marder (Network of Buddhist Organisations (UK)); Ms Katie McColgan (Inter-faith Council for Wales); 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); Mr Vinay Shah (Institute of Jainology); Dr Vinaya Sharma (Vishwa Hindu Parishad (UK)); Mr Anthony Silkoff (Board of Deputies of British Jews); Mr Jamie Spurway (Interfaith Scotland); Mr Narendra Waghela (BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha); Professor Dr Paul Weller (Inter Faith Working Group of the Baptist Union of Great Britain); and Mr Karl Wightman (National Spiritual Assembly of Baha'is).

**Apologies:** Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales; and the Salvation Army.

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

#### **Note about nature of FCF minutes**

The minutes of the main sessions of the meeting of the Faith Communities Forum of IFN (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.

A copy of the Terms of Reference of the FCF is at <https://www.interfaith.org.uk/about/governance>. Before each meeting there is usually background material prepared for the items under discussion.

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

1. Bishop Jonathan Clark, in the chair, welcomed those present.
2. He noted that his fellow Co-Moderator, Malcolm Deboo, had asked him to chair the whole meeting on this occasion.
3. A period of silence was observed, reflecting on the needs of communities and the country and keeping in mind those working to protect everyone and defeat the virus.
4. Apologies were noted.
5. Bishop Clark noted that this was a special session of the FCF focusing on the re-opening of places of worship and the impacts of COVID-19 on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. The FCF was a forum for discussion, debate and mutual learning rather than being a decision-making body.
6. He reminded members that in keeping with the FCF's decision about the nature of minutes, the main section of the minute would be available to the public (unless the FCF request a closed session).
7. It would be helpful for points from the meeting to be made available to Government officials who were working on the matters under discussion, so that voices of all faith communities were heard.

### **Agenda Item 2: COVID-19 – Opening places of worship**

8. Bishop Clark drew attention to the material in the Background Note.
9. Dr Crabtree said that the factual information in the section relating to the UK Government and England had been confirmed as accurate by an official at the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). She was grateful to the Revd Aled Edwards and Dr Maureen Sier for providing the material on the position in Scotland and Wales. Where points related to the UK Government Task Force she could, if the FCF wished, let MHCLG have key points made by members. It was agreed that this should be done.

[Note It was agreed at a later point in the meeting that points from organisations should on this occasion be attributed so that they could be useful when provided to Government. Attributions have therefore been included in the minute where the point is one for feedback.]

10. Bishop Clark said that the material in the background note was very useful and thanked IFN staff for it. Different communities had different settings and different perspectives on the matter. It was important to try to hear a variety of views.

11. In discussion the following points were made:

- Since the mandirs and temples had closed there had been a steep drop in income because there were no devotees coming. However, priests were still coming in twice a day for worship, so salaries had to be paid and there were also still ongoing costs, for example utilities and CCTV cameras. Devotees wanted temples to re-open as soon as possible. However, they were anxious. They were waiting for the results of Government's review into why COVID-19 had a greater impact on BAME communities. It might not be safe for older members of the community to come to the temple even with social distancing. [Vishwa Hindu Parishad UK]
- The Quaker community had plans to return to a mixture of worship later in the summer, including some outdoors and some in meeting houses with very limited numbers of people and using screens. Some worship on Zoom would also be retained. It was helpful to look at examples of fellow worshippers in other countries, particularly in Germany, who had explored many options of alternative ways of worshipping that did not involve large crowds of people. [Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations]
- A participant spoke who was a member of the Taskforce. He said that there had been two meetings so far, on 15 and 20 May. There had been a lot of feedback from communities so far. At the first meeting the discussion had been around re-opening places of worship from 4 July, holding small weddings and so forth. An MHCLG official had said that no decision had yet been taken. At the second meeting, there had been discussion about possible re-opening from 1 June. There had been discussion about the impact on BAME communities, the number of worshippers who might be able to attend and safety measures that might need to be in place.
- There was no Buddhist representation on the Taskforce and there had not yet been any communication by it with the Buddhist Society. This was disappointing. [Buddhist Society]
- A participant who was a member of the Taskforce said that the Government was due to be in touch with communities not represented on it.
- It would be wise for Government and faith communities to look at what might be learned from other countries that were further ahead in the process, such as Germany and Italy. Even though some European countries did not perhaps have the same range of sensitivities to diversity and faith communities as in the UK there might still be learning. Alongside the Roman Catholic Church, the Conference of European Churches, which linked 114 churches of different denominations, had been bringing together what was happening in different church contexts throughout the continent. <https://www.ceceurope.org/church-response-to-covid-19/> UK faith communities might be able to learn some lessons, though there were obviously different contexts which had to be taken into account. An email had been sent by the speaker to the European Network on Religion and Belief suggesting that they might do a service on a European level bringing things together. [Inter Faith Working Group of the Baptist Union of GB]
- During Ramadan all the programmes, for young children to the elderly, had been held online by the speaker's organisation. This had worked well. Instead of coming together for iftars, they had provided food for members of the community who had relied on coming to the mosque for iftars previously because they could not cook for themselves. There was also a team visiting elderly people in the

community and parents struggling with looking after their children. This was all done within the safety guidelines. [World Ahlul-Bayt Islamic League]

- There would be a mixed economy of worship going forward for the Unitarian churches, at least until next Spring. There was not much appetite from congregations for re-opening places of worship on 4 July. There was, however, more pressure from other users of church halls, including pre-schools who were due to start back in June. It was problematic that places of worship were not able to access the retail, hospitality and leisure grant because they were exempt from business rates rather than having 100% rate relief as some other charities did. It was hoped that there could be some movement from the Government on this, particularly as the deep cleans required before places of worship reopened would be a significant cost on top of a reduction of income from the period. [General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches]
- The Jain community had suffered a loss in income from the lack of people coming to worship and not being able to hire out its halls. They had been holding worship online and also social events for the community. The Jain community was not represented on the Taskforce. It was hoped that they would be consulted. There were often thousands of people at their religious gatherings as Jains were diligent in their devotion. People were very much missing their social and religious gatherings. [Institute of Jainology]
- The Faith Communities Forum [of the Welsh Government] had been meeting regularly with the Welsh Government, every 2 to 3 weeks. At the moment there was a deal of nervousness among faith leaders about re-opening places of worship. They really wanted a medical steer about whether it was safe. There was a concern that volunteers were often elderly retired people, so were more at risk. There had a great deal of online work among faiths in Wales. [Inter-faith Council for Wales]
- Ramadan and Eid had been challenging but also a time of innovation and adaptation. The recent focus on Dominic Cummings had been felt to be a big distraction from the national effort. Pictures of full beaches and Mr Cummings' actions were causing a lot of frustration on the ground. Many people in Muslim communities felt that it was a kick in the teeth, especially when they had patiently going through religious festivals in lockdown. Because of the greater impact on people from BAME communities, Muslim communities felt that they would be among the hardest hit if social distancing were relaxed too soon. Eid Al-Adha would be coming up at the end of July and there was a lot of interest in how outdoor prayer might be made possible. There had been lots of examples of that in Germany, including an Ikea car park being made available for prayer. Communication from the Taskforce had to this point been far from ideal. It had been two weeks since it was formed and it would be helpful to have something substantial from it soon. Some of the initial guidance from the Scottish Government about the phasing of re-opening had been quite detailed. Similar information for England would be helpful. [Muslim Council of Britain]
- The United Reformed Church in the UK (URC UK) had produced a discussion paper for pandemic recovery and resumption, entitled 'Ready for the new normal', which was on its website: <https://urc.org.uk/images/Communications/New-Normal-2020.pdf>. Other Churches had found it helpful and it had also been drawn on by the Scottish Government. There had also been helpful conversations with the Muslim Council of Britain around the document recently. People should be encouraged to have inter faith discussions locally. The URC UK had strong partnership with churches in Germany. There had been quite an outbreak of COVID-19 following

a service at a Baptist church in Germany. That had affected morale and attendance was subsequently down at URC churches the following weekend. [The United Reformed Church in the UK]

- All places of worship were suffering from a loss of income, but it was better to be safe than sorry. The BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha saw safety as the most important thing. COVID-19 had brought new innovations, including using Zoom. BAPS was doing a lot online and this was working well. It seemed difficult for the Taskforce to make decisions about re-opening places of worship without them having first-hand experience of these, especially the large places of worship. For example, the Neasden temple often had up to 9,000 people attending from all ages. [BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha]
- The Neasden temple was a public place of interest as well as a place of worship, so there would also need to be guidelines on how to keep the public safe. Because of this the temple was setting up its own taskforce to work out how to open safely. Some donations had been coming in online. [BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha]
- Pagans preferred to worship outdoors. At the moment that was in breach of the ruling in England that only 2 people could meet in a public space but it would likely be possible when restrictions were eased. Also, Pagans shared consecrated food and drink as part of some of their ceremonies. It would be interesting to hear how other faith communities were doing this safely. [Pagan Federation]
- Some Buddhist services were held in people's homes, rather than in places of worship. It would be helpful for the Taskforce also to consider this. [Network of Buddhist Organisations]
- The use of places of worship by people other than their members was important not only in terms of income for religious groups, but also expectations from/services to the wider community. This aspect of re-opening places of worship (playgroups, seniors' groups, advice offices and so forth) should be considered by the Taskforce as well as the faith community's own domestic need. Some places of worship were also places of interest/tourism.
- The Taskforce could perhaps reflect on whether their demands on local faith communities to keep buildings safe, secure and healthy were disproportionate in relationship to the possible benefit that those services were providing to community. Places of worship should not be kept closed because they could not be kept secure, when they could be providing great benefit to the community.
- The Buddhist Society had lost a lot of confidence in the Government's decision making; it was therefore unlikely that it would be re-opening its premises until September. This was in order to protect its members as it would be very risky to open places of worship before then. It had lost considerable income and had cancelled some of the biggest events in its calendar, but protecting the community was most important. [Buddhist Society]
- For very many Catholics the ability to visit a church for individual prayer and meditation was at the heart of their faith; so the safe, phased reopening of places of worship was something the Catholic community looked forward to, whilst recognising the different traditions that other communities had in regard to individual and communal worship. [Catholic Church of England and Wales – emailed point summarised and fed into the meeting by IFN's Executive Director].

12. FCF members agreed that, on this occasion, points could be attributed to organisations in the minutes. Comments would be sent to participants in draft for them to clear.

13. Dr Crabtree commented that a fundamental principle coming through many of the points made was about the priority of safety. However the profoundly important role of places of worship in the life of communities was likewise clear. She noted that there had been a petition launched by someone on Change.org asking the Government to allow essential places of worship to open earlier than non-essential shops.

***Action: Points from organisations represented to sent to MHCLG***

### **Agenda Item 3: COVID-19 – Impact on BAME communities**

14. Bishop Clark drew attention to the material in the Background Note. He noted that the Public Health England (PHE) Review team were aware of the present meeting and had asked if it might be possible to ask members what they envisaged their role might be in supporting and protecting their constituents should there be subsequent waves of the pandemic.
15. In discussion the following points were made:
- It would be better only to re-open places of worship gradually when it was safe to do so. It was well-known which groups were more vulnerable to COVID-19 and that should be taken into consideration. This was a more important point that thinking about communities role in the context of a 'second wave'.
  - From what was known so far about the underlying conditions that made people from BAME backgrounds more susceptible to COVID-19, the solutions would seem to have their roots in long-term strategies for how BAME communities could become more resistant by improving their health. It had been said that racist conditions, for example, could erode people's immune systems. Socio-economic situations also needed to be looked at, including whether diet and lack of exercise might make them weaker. If there were to be second or third peaks, there were aspects that could not be looked at in the immediate short-term, but needed longer term consideration. Hopefully Professor Fenton's report would give some more information on the reasons. What was learned from the science should then inform how people behave.
  - This was an issue of inequality. The Quaker community was working actively with trade unions and others on a 'Build Back Better' campaign. Part of this was looking at all the inequality issues which were part of the drivers for the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on BAME communities. This was a long-term approach. The short-term approach had to focus on safety.
  - This was not just about looking after individuals. It was about structures in society which made whole groups more susceptible to an illness.
  - This topic had been discussed at meetings of the Moral and Ethical Advisory Group. There were many theories but no single answer.
  - There was a role for faith leaders to encourage those suffering from illness other than COVID-19 to seek appropriate medical help. There was evidence that medical help for cardio-vascular diseases and cancer especially were being delayed out of fear of catching the virus. Faith leaders should be encouraged to support the PHE call that 'normal' medical emergencies should be addressed with the usual urgency. People might respond to this better from faith leaders than from external sources.

16. Dr Crabtree said that she understood that the question had been posed by PHE in the light of its work on finalising its report. Any other reflections from individual communities on the question posed by PHE could be emailed to her after the meeting.

**Agenda Item 4: Date of next meeting**

17. Bishop Clark thanked everyone for attending and for their contributions. If there were any further reflections on the meeting's questions members could let the IFN office have these in the next day or so.
18. He also IFN staff for their preparation for the meeting and continuing to work at full throttle in rapidly changing environment.
19. The next meeting would be held on Thursday 25 June.

3 June 2020

The points below were made on Chat during the discussion under Agenda Item 2 on COVID-19 – Opening places of worship. Not all meeting participants could see the chat feed. Some points were read out by the Chair and these have been incorporated into the main minutes. Other comments are included as an annex ‘for information’.

- A more generic UK website worth keeping an eye open on with regard specifically to religion and law (mainly with the UK reference) is at [https://www.lawandreligionuk.com/2020/03/12/trashed-3\\_trashed/](https://www.lawandreligionuk.com/2020/03/12/trashed-3_trashed/)
- There may be a grant offered to places of worship which had lost income.
- A church hall had been told not to employ its cleaner but to transfer that responsibility to the pre-school and have the building only used by the pre-school.
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints was following guidelines on its newsroom - a two phase approach with guidelines on how to manage services during staged opening. They were also following government guidelines. They were awaiting further government guidelines and had a way forward prepared.
- Prof Bhikhu Kotecha had a team researching on COVID-19 <https://lcnl.org/survey/>
- Re Pagans, ‘dedicated’ food and COVID-19, conversation could be useful with Catholic Christians who had had to think through how to handle the physicality of Holy Communion, particularly in other European countries that had already started opening up places of worship.

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Following the meeting, IFN received two further points by email about opening places of worship:

- The Zoroastrian community was also disappointed not to have been included on the Taskforce. August was one of the busiest months for Zoroastrians in terms of holy days and the community had a number of challenges and concerns.
- Buddhists also had small let properties that might be used as practice centres, temples etc. Each of these was a concern for many Buddhists as they sought a way back to congregating as they did before.