

THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK

MINUTES OF VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE FAITH COMMUNITIES FORUM

at 11.00am on Thursday 30 April 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); Ms Jo Backus (Network of Buddhist Organisations (UK)); Marigold Bentley (Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations); the Revd Philip Brooks (The United Reformed Church in the UK); Minister David Bruton (Spiritualists' National Union); Mr Mohinder Singh Chana (Network of Sikh Organisations (UK)); the Revd Peter Colwell (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland); Ms Siriol Davies (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland); Major David Evans (Salvation Army); 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); Ms Smita Oza (BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha); 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); Dr Vinaya Sharma (Vishwa Hindu Parishad (UK)); Mr Tarang Shelat (Hindu Forum of Britain); Dr Maureen Sier (Interfaith Scotland); Mr Anthony Silkoff (Board of Deputies of British Jews); Ms Elizabeth Slade (General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches); Professor Dr Paul Weller (Interfaith 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

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. His fellow Co-Moderator, Malcolm Deboo, had asked him to chair the whole meeting on this occasion. This was partly because he was only able to dial in by telephone, but also because he was President of the Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe and, in this role, was having to deal with a number of urgent matters at short notice.
3. Bishop Clark explained that IFN had received an email from MHCLG a short while before the meeting to say that unfortunately Ms Miriam Hodgson was no longer able to attend to speak about the faith-related aspects of the Government's response to COVID-19. Some of the items on the Agenda would therefore be re-ordered.
4. A period of silence was observed, keeping in mind those suffering from the impact of COVID-19, including the bereaved, the sick and those supporting and helping them; and also remembering the work of faith communities and those of no faith to help in the current crisis.
5. Bishop Clark noted that this was an extra meeting of the FCF in the context of the rapidly changing COVID-19 situation. 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). Minutes would, as usual, summarise points and these will be unattributed except for a general reference to faith community where the community of the speaker is relevant to understanding the point.
7. Apologies were noted.

INTER FAITH NETWORK MATTERS SESSION

[Paragraphs 8 to 10]

Agenda Item 2: COVID-19 and faith communities

a) Opening update from the Inter Faith Network for the UK

11. Dr Crabtree said that IFN's dedicated website section on COVID-19 included a section on faith community guidance and responses. This was an important resource. It would be helpful if members could check that their faith community's guidance was included and to let IFN know of any items that could be added. IFN's Project Assistant, Ms Madiha Hussein, was updating the pages on a regular basis. Consideration was being given to adding a page on how faith communities were working with Government and other public agencies, including local resilience forums and the NHS. A little more information was needed about the pattern of that.

12. She encouraged FCF members to follow IFN on social media; it was highlighting the work of many FCF members, which was inspiring to others.
13. IFN was also working to ensure that key information was also accessible to those who were not online. This included using Circulars and making telephone calls, particularly to local inter faith groups that might be feeling isolated at the moment. Such groups were helping support relationships between faith communities in positive and helpful ways.
14. Bishop Clark thanked the IFN staff for the way in which it had adapted its ways of working to meet the current needs. It was good to see the many items highlighted on social media, which demonstrated the various ways in which faith communities were serving the wider community during this time.

b) Faith-related aspects of the Government's Response to COVID-19

15. Dr Crabtree said faith community bodies were connecting with Government in a range of ways. Although there was a UK Government approach to COVID-19 which was currently broadly the same in the devolved nations, there were different governments and different UK Government Departments with which people were seeking to engage. For example, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) was leading on issues relating to civil society and loneliness and MHCLG was leading on faith-related dimensions, particularly in the England facing context and local resilience forums. The MHCLG role included matters such as the opening/closing of premises, including places of worship, and also work relating to faith communities and funerals. Public Health England (PHE), Public Health Scotland and equivalent bodies also had their own roles. It was not, however, easy to grasp the detail of exactly how the different pieces of Government engagement were inter-relating. Might it be valuable for IFN to do more work on this trying to sketch out a kind of map?
16. In discussion the following points were made. Responses from the Executive Director are in italics.
 - Some kind of map / diagram would be helpful. It might also be helpful to have an outline regarding the different inquiries that had been announced. For example, the Government had launched a review into why people from black and minority ethnic communities (BAME) were disproportionately more affected by COVID-19; the Labour Party had also announced a review; and the scientific community might also be doing one.
 - A map would be welcome. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was talking to Government about using its places of worship for testing centres. It would be helpful to be approaching the right Departments on the right issues. If IFN could collate that information it would be very helpful.
 - It was a good suggestion. Some other organisations did have extensive maps but they did not seem to link up. This was partly because during an emergency there were always lot of rushed meetings. It was important to have more issues worked out in advance, because there had been warnings of a pandemic. There had been attempts to run through a mock pandemic but no real decisions had been taken. Faith communities should have more representation.
 - The information provided by IFN, and also provided by Churches Together in England, had been extremely useful and was being distributed through the

Quaker community. One of reasons that there were so many meetings was that the situation was changing constantly. It might not be sensible to ask IFN to undertake a lot of work in creating a map that might go out of date very quickly if the rate of decisions did not slow down.

This was an important point. The suggestion was not for a detailed map including, for example, staff contacts, but rather for a basic, 'trainspotter's guide' to which Departments were handling what and how particular matters were dealt with by the devolved nations and the UK Government.

- 12 or 15 years ago, in the days when there were Regional Faith Forums in all the regions in England, there were several meetings for emergency planning on a regional basis, in which faith communities had been very actively involved. Most of the information would now be out of date but there would be some sort of paper trail of the decisions made and devolution of these which might be accessible to IFN and to Government Departments. They might be of historical interest only but there also might be some useful leads.

They would be of historical interest. Some of those working on the local resilience forums and through the relevant secretariat of the Cabinet Office did seem to be aware of the pre-history but were now working with a network of local resilience forums. Work was taking place much more within local authority areas. Many who had worked on them were now putting their efforts into local resilience forums.

17. The FCF agreed that an overview note on the role of various Government Departments and public agencies in relation to COVID-19 and how they interrelated would be helpful.

Action: IFN office to create an overview note about the role of various Government Departments and public agencies in relation to COVID-19.

c) Roundtable discussion

18. Bishop Clark invited FCF members to offer reflections and raise any concerns on the issues outlined in the Annotated Agenda, and any specific matters that might need to be fed into the ongoing discussions with Government Departments.

i) Funerals

19. In discussion the following points were made:
 - Some Buddhist funeral services were being conducted online, with monks chanting, reading and performing some rituals.
 - At a recent Baptist meeting it had been noted that there was some concern in the Kirklees/Calderdale area that there appeared to be a number of funerals taking place without religious representatives being present.
 - In the Jain community dedicated funeral directors were being used for funerals and cremations. They were well-versed in what was available. Zoom was being used for those unable to attend. It seemed to be working well. Prayer meetings were also being held using Zoom enabling people to join the bereaved family.
 - A crematorium in London was apparently requiring funeral officiants to wear full Personal Protection Equipment (PPE).
 - MEAG had had some success in this area. There had been a lot of anxiety about funerals, how many people were allowed to attend, social distancing

and so forth. After a great deal of work, some more helpful guidance had been produced by Government. However, faith communities should have had more influence.

- In London the faith communities' engagement with the resilience forum had had significant impact but the involvement of faith communities varied across the country.
- There had been a consultation the previous week by the Scottish Government which was beginning to explore how places of worship might be able to offer funeral services. At the time of that discussion, most faith communities had said that they were not in a position to host funeral services in places of worship. This was because they believed that it would open up a host of difficulties in relation to other members of the community wanting to visit, which might result in too many people. There had already been some difficulties with excess numbers of people turning up at funeral services led by funeral directors. It was only at consultation stage at present and it was not proposed that funeral services would take place in places of worship unless/until there was consensus and greater understanding about how it might be done carefully and properly. It was helpful that the conversation was happening.
- At a recent IFN meeting for member National and Regional Inter Faith Organisations there had been an interesting and detailed report by one participant about how matters were being handled in Leicester. It might be helpful for that information to be shared in some way with FCF members.

20. Dr Crabtree said that the links provided in the Background Note to the Agenda should give information on the current position. There had been a shift to allowing more mourners at funerals and there had been a change in position leading to officiants being present within crematoria. This of course still did not address the profound grief of people. The use of memorials and finding other ways to mark the death of people's loved ones later on was being encouraged by some faith communities. It would be helpful to know whether FCF had any learning to share on, for example, the holding of memorials and the handling of the emotional dimension.

21. In discussion the following points were made:

- On the Methodist Church website there was a service available for people to participate in a funeral at which they were not allowed to be present.
- The Church of England had provided a similar resource.
- The World Ahlul-Bayt Islamic League did not seem to be having much trouble providing funeral rites to members of its community. It had found a way, in keeping with the PHE guidance, to wash and shroud bodies and bury them. Up to 10 people were allowed to attend a burial. After 40 days they had a memorial service. Every Thursday and Friday there were online community services and they were being used for the memorial services. It seemed to be working well as a way of supporting emotional wellbeing.
- There was no difference in current Quaker practice as they always marked the life lived, not the death. For everybody who died among Quakers there was an epistle or a testimony to the grace of God as shown in the life of that person. There was usually a memorial meeting sometime after the death to allow people time to grieve before celebrating the life. The epistles were then all published for the Yearly Meeting and were available online for anyone to read. It was not a new practice but other faith communities might find it interesting.

- The Caribbean community was missing its usual funeral arrangements, including mourning and dressing the grave. Memorials were only being considered post-COVID. Some funerals were being held online with people transmitting live what was happening. There was likely to be a sea of memorial services when people were able to meet face to face.

ii) Operating with places of worship closed

- The exit strategy from lockdown in regard to places of worship would be important. In regard to funerals, because of the timings involved, there was a Government initiative to which faith communities responded. It would be helpful perhaps if there were proactive input from faith communities to Government about coming out of lockdown. If there were a mechanism to do this across faiths, it would be better to do so now, rather than waiting 3 or 4 weeks.
- A priest at the Jain temple in Potters Bar was conducting ceremonies from the temple and broadcasting them on Zoom. This was found helpful.
- The London Buddhist Vihara was providing online guided meditation and chanting every evening from 6pm to 7pm and nearly 700 people were joining in. This could be found on their Facebook page.
- BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha was ensuring telephone calls were made to the most vulnerable, especially those living alone. It had also set up daily evening prayers and discussion. Its weekly women's group had now moved online with up to 60 people coming together for 2 hours, saying prayers, singing religious songs and sharing with each other.
- It was inspiring to see how much was taking place in all faith communities. The month of Ramadan was currently taking place for the Muslim community. Muslims had been sharing and learning from what other faith communities had done for their festivals the previous month. This was very positive and it was important to keep sharing good practice.
- Many Buddhist communities were putting teachings, prayers and other gatherings online. This seemed to be working well.
- The Spiritualists' National Union (SNU) had been moving a lot of its resources and provisions online. At the weekend one of its services had been Zoom 'bombed' and inappropriate material shared. The Communications Director of the SNU had issued on social media some recommendations on good practice for using social media and video conferencing, which could perhaps be shared with other groups.
- The Buddhist Society was now fully online and had added to its programme. It was likely to keep many aspects of this in the future.

Dr Crabtree reported that the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, which had sent apologies, had provided an update for the meeting, which was that the Catholic Diocese of Salford had recently held a successful webinar on 'Love in action in a post-Coronavirus society: Re-imagining Caritas'. It had been held with Caritas, the agency of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales for domestic social action.

iii) Chaplaincy

- Chaplains had been in high demand. Some hospitals had come to realise how important they were.
- It was important to attend dying patients but where this was not possible the Sri Lankan Sangha Sabha had recorded some CDs. It had recently distributed

these to hospitals in Northwick Park and Ealing, asking for them to be played when a patient was close to death.

iv) Faith community responses to help those affected by COVID-19

- In the Jain community many organisations such as OneJain and the Oshwal Association were assisting through distributing food parcels meeting requirements for different communities.

v) Financial impacts on faith-based bodies of COVID-19

- No points were offered.

vi) Ethical principles and decisions on care

Dr Crabtree said that a few people at the present meeting were members of the Moral and Ethical Advisory Group (MEAG). The remit of MEAG had expanded to give advice in a reactive way during the COVID-19 crisis. As noted in the Background Note to the Agenda, Wales and Scotland had set up their own groupings. This was a very significant area. One of the toughest issues was how resources were allocated and how difficult decisions were made. It would be helpful to hear from MEAG members if there was anything they were able to share.

In discussion the following points were made by members of MEAG:

- MEAG had written a paper on how ventilators might be allocated if the system were flooded and choices needed to be made. Although it had had very good philosophical underpinnings, it had not had much clinical knowledge. The decisions were taken away from MEAG in the end.
- MEAG was largely a responsive body. It was posed questions by the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) and asked to comment on various aspects of policy and the thinking developed around policy, for example around care of the dying, because it was an aspect of social care and intensive care units. MEAG did not generate its own agenda, rather it was largely asked to comment on work undertaken by DHSC. There were from time to time representatives from the Cabinet Office and MHCLG. MEAG was there to offer an ethical and moral perspective on policies being generated. As an example, MEAG had been very concerned that in all the ways in which decisions were being made around prioritising intensive care, those who were disabled should not be disadvantaged, and should possibly be prioritised. MEAG was thoroughly multi faith.

vii) Other issues

Dr Crabtree said that, as noted earlier, both the Government and the Labour Party had announced that they would be looking into why people from BAME backgrounds appeared to be disproportionately affected by Coronavirus (in the case of Labour an inquiry was planned). The Government's exploration was being led by PHE and NHS England. There had been concerns reported within the Muslim community, and other communities, about the appointment of Trevor Phillips to provide expert support to PHE in their investigation.

In discussion the following points were made:

- There were concerns from a cross-section of BAME communities about the appointment of Trevor Phillips. It was hoped that PHE would listen to those concerns.
- The Government's inquiry was due to be led by Professor Kevin Fenton of PHE and the Labour Party's inquiry was due to be chaired by Baroness

Doreen Lawrence. There was also an inquiry launched by a Parliamentary Committee with a very short submission date of 30 April. It would be helpful to know how to make submissions to all these inquiries.

- The phenomenon was not limited to the UK. There had been various responses to it. One of the latest suggestions appeared to be that people from BAME communities should be taken out of frontline work. It would be better to test people for a predisposition otherwise such an intervention could lead to people from BAME communities to be seen as a liability when recruitment processes were taking place.

Dr Crabtree said that IFN had been carefully following the announcements. She noted that there was a complexity in that there was a difference between ethnicity and faith. The first four doctors to die had been Muslims and a number of doctors from Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and other faith backgrounds had also died. There had been a comment on social media from within the Sikh community that COVID-19 vulnerability related to ethnicity and not faith.

IFN's focus was on inter faith relations and faith community engagement with public life. From coverage to date, the principal causes of the higher BAME level of deaths appeared to be linked to health conditions and social and economic conditions affecting BAME communities. There was, of course, a large crossover between faith and BAME but it was important for IFN not to cut across the work of bodies dealing more directly with ethnicity and health. IFN would seek to provide some briefing on the different initiatives to look into the matter. The inter faith dimension was not obvious but it was a matter that touched faith communities deeply and IFN had been flagging up the significance of loss to those communities.

- There was a rigorous debate going on within the Sikh community about ethnicity and faith. Some Sikhs believed strongly that Sikhs should be classed as an ethnic group, but a large portion of the Sikh community saw that argument as flawed.
- Some other faith communities might have similar issues.
- The issue around ethnicity and faith was not going to be resolved through these inquiries. A nuanced approach was needed. There were no simple answers. There were socio-economic issues, and also possible links back to slavery. The percentage of deaths of frontline workers was being compared to the percentage of BAME people in British society as opposed to the percentage of those workers in health care. That was a false comparison.

22. Dr Crabtree said that she would write to try to explore the facts about the different inquiries. This would be on the basis that IFN engaged with faith communities and that there was an overlap with ethnicity. It would be helpful if those present could feedback anything they found out within the next week or so.

Action: IFN to write to explore facts about the different inquiries into why people from BAME backgrounds appeared to be disproportionately affected by Coronavirus.

Agenda Item 4: VE Day and faith communities

23. Dr Crabtree said that the Royal British Legion (RBL), which IFN had helped organise the roundtable on faith communities and remembrance last year, had sent material

to be included in the Background Note to the Agenda for the FCF about VE Day and faith communities. It had found the roundtable input very helpful and continued to work on inclusive remembrance. It was keen for faith communities to be involved in marking VE Day and for them to share information with their membership.

24. One participant said that the roundtable with the RBL last year had been very useful. There had been a fear that the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of VE Day would be taken over post Brexit in a triumphal and unpleasant way. However, churches and other faith communities had worked hard to remind everybody that the focus should be on celebrating peace and talking about what peace meant and what mattered.

Agenda Item 5: Consultations

a) Protection of Places of Worship

25. Dr Crabtree noted that the consultation on 'Protecting places of worship' had been extended to 28 June. This was a significant consultation and the extension was helpful. She believed that at least a couple of IFN's faith community member bodies had been in touch with the Home Office about extending the deadline.
26. The FCF noted the position.

b) APPG on Religion in the Media inquiry into religious literacy in print and broadcast media

27. Dr Crabtree said that in the past the FCF had shared its views on many aspects of religious literacy in the media. All Party Parliamentary Groups were not governmental instruments but could inform the thinking of MPs. Members might wish to make submissions if they had not already done so.
28. In response to a question, Dr Crabtree said that there was also an APPG on Religious Education, which had done some work on religious literacy a while ago.
29. The FCF noted the position.

Agenda Item 6: Any Other Business

30. Bishop Clark said that IFN had received a letter from the Chairs of the joint Baptist Inter Faith Working Group and United Reformed Church Interfaith Enabling Group requesting that the FCF give further consideration to the situation of the 3.5 million members of the European Union who lived in the UK. They had asked to make a presentation to the FCF about this at its meeting on 25 June. There was an overlap with issues of faith in that it affected faith communities but it was not faith-specific. The Executive Director had consulted with him and his fellow Co-Moderator who thought it would be appropriate for this to be on the Agenda of the FCF meeting on 25 June.
31. Dr Crabtree noted that if it were on the Agenda at the 25 June meeting, the item on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking would likely need to be postponed until a future meeting.

32. No objections were raised to inclusion of an agenda item as outlined.
33. A representative of the two groups which had sent the letter thanked the Co-Moderators for the planned inclusion of the Item on the Agenda at the 25 June meeting.

Action: Agenda Item on the situation of the 3.5 million members of the European Union who live in the UK to be on the Agenda for the FCF meeting on 25 June

34. A participant from the Buddhist community noted that Wesak Day, or Buddha Day, would be marked in the first week of May. This was an important day for Buddhists. Buddhists wished everyone a peaceful time: “May no harm to come to you, may no difficulties come to you, may no problems come to you from the Coronavirus and may your minds fill with peace”.

Agenda Item 7: Date of next meeting

35. Bishop Clark noted that the next meeting was due to be held on Thursday 25 June.
36. Dr Crabtree said that if faith communities developed any further work in relation to COVID-19, it would be very helpful if they could let IFN know, and keep in touch on a regular basis, so that good practice could be shared.
37. He thanked everyone for attending and for their contributions and also IFN staff for their preparation for the meeting.

15 May 2020

The points below were made on Chat during the roundtable discussion under Agenda Item 2 on COVID-19 and faith communities. Not all meeting participants could see the chat feed and comments made within it are not minuted points of the meeting. On this occasion they are included as an annex 'for information'.

i) Funerals

- There would be an important role for faith communities in supporting those whose grief remained unresolved not only through memorial services, but also the personal and therapeutic work which groups like CRUSE were adept at providing.
- In terms of later memorials, there might be scope, demand and value in some kind of UK and also four nations memorial event, organised on a cross-faiths basis.
- For Pagans, the physical presence and movement of ceremonies were very important (speaking to the unconscious mind as well as to conscious awareness). But the Pagan community was also extremely IT-literate, and many routine gatherings (moots and so forth) had now moved online. This was working well. Nonetheless a great number of memorial ceremonies would likely take place once the lockdown was lifted.

ii) Operating with places of worship closed

- Zoom bombing/hacking had also happened with Jewish events online.
- The Unitarian annual meeting had been reinvented to be a three day online gathering. The videos were available at <https://www.unitarian.org.uk/beingtogether>. The keynote speaker, Alastair McIntosh, had spoken a little about the theology of Zoom-bombing.
- There were tools in Zoom that could help prevent meetings being hacked or 'bombed', such as using a waiting room facility, and requiring a password. If IFN could provide some guidance about using such tools, that would be most helpful.
- Lots of groups suffered from Zoom 'bombing'. Zoom meetings required careful administration in advance.

vii) Other issues

- The Guardian had requested faith communities to get in touch to share their experiences. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/30/religion-faith-communities-how-have-you-been-affected-by-coronavirus>