

THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK

MINUTES OF VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE FAITH COMMUNITIES FORUM

at 2.15pm on Monday 30 March 2020

by Zoom

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

Present: Dr Desmond Biddulph CBE (Buddhist Society); 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); Major David Evans (Salvation Army); Elaine Green (Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations); Ms Prudence Jones (Pagan Federation); Mr Hassan Joudi (Muslim Council of Britain); Mr Rajnish Kashyap (Hindu Council (UK)); The Revd Dr Reynaldo F. Leao-Neto (Methodist Church in Britain); Mr John Marder (Network of Buddhist Organisations (UK)); Rabbi David Mason (Board of Deputies of British Jews); Ms Smita Oza (BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha); Ms Trupti Patel (Hindu Forum of Britain); 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); Ms Katharina Smith-Muller (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales); Professor Dr Paul Weller (Interfaith Working Group of the Baptist Union of Great Britain); and Mr Karl Wightman (National Spiritual Assembly of Baha'is).

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. No apologies had been offered.

Agenda Item 2: Round table introductions

3. Those present introduced themselves.

Agenda Item 3: COVID-19 - Background

4. Bishop Clark drew attention to the background information in the Annotated Agenda. He asked the Executive Director to give a brief overview on what IFN had been doing in relation to COVID-19. Dr Crabtree said that, as was noted in the Agenda, IFN had been collating faith community guidance on a page on its website and updating this regularly. It had also been flagging up to Government Departments and others the importance of consulting with faith communities wherever possible. IFN staff had also been taking part in various virtual meetings held by, among others, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), the National Crime Agency (NCA) and Public Health England (PHE).

Agenda Item 5: How faith communities are responding

5. Bishop Clark drew attention to the information in the Annotated Agenda, which included the following topics: guidance; providing online worship, pastoral and educational resources; providing pastoral and practical support to members; the 'digital gap'; and encouraging voluntary action to aid those in need. He invited members to offer reflections on how their communities were responding and any challenges they were facing.
6. In discussion the following points were made:
 - There had been questions in the press about whether there had been good enough communication for communities which did not operate much in English.
 - The Pagan Federation was currently experiencing problems with its website and email but it had an active Facebook presence and so local Pagan groups were able to communicate with it through that. In Paganism there were a lot of small groups which were autonomous. Participants knew one another locally and so communication was generally at a more informal local level, rather than provided centrally.
 - The Catholic Christian community, and parts of the wider Christian community, had been staying in touch via streamed liturgies. This was probably closer to the raison d'être of faith communities than issuing health guidance. The latter was included on the Coronavirus section of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales' website, but was better sourced direct from Government.
 - Communication in the Sikh community had largely been through Sikh TV channels, the internet and Whatsapp groups. The messages seemed to have been well-distributed. Gurdwaras had been involved in social action work, such as supplying meals to those self-isolating in the community.

- Jain umbrella bodies had been in communication with around 30 Jain organisations. They had streamed Government instructions. Jain organisations had also been live streaming worship for congregations, delivering medicines and food parcels, checking on vulnerable people, and delivering food to nurses in Barnet and Northwick Park in London. The umbrella bodies were also liaising with organisations from other faith communities, including the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, Hindu Forum of Britain and the Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe, and were involved in consultations with MHCLG.
- The Spiritualists' National Union had created a lot of activity via social media to support their churches and encourage them to support their congregations. Spiritualists had been teaching and worshipping online for around 11 years, so mechanisms were already in place, but capacity had been increased. They had recently held a very large meeting for participants from all over the world. They were now holding regular healing groups online as well and discussion groups every Monday evening. Keeping communication going was key at this time.
- A number of Baptist groups had been in touch with their national body about the differential digital comfort and ability on the part of some constituents. For example, some older people were not used to virtual communications. This meant that live digital media could not be relied upon entirely; sometimes, for example, services needed to be recorded onto CD and delivered.
- All senior missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (CJCLDS), who had either switched to mission in an online capacity or had finished their missions altogether in the UK, had returned to their countries of origin. For the last 2 years they had been focusing on home-centred supported church, so mechanisms were already in place and they were continuing. There was social media content being put out every day, reminding everyone of the Government guidelines. Local leaders throughout the UK were regularly sent emails to disseminate in their local areas. There was, of course, still a need to minister to those who were not on social media by, for example, talking on the telephone. Food parcels were also being delivered. CJCLDS was now looking for ways to join with other faith communities to help the wider need.
- The Hindu Forum of Britain had sent out the Government's guidelines to all its member bodies in the UK. It was communicating with them all, working regionally, at county level and local level, with member bodies and with local authorities. It was also involved in a lot of sewa activities with Sewa International. There was a good community spirit. They were trying to raise extra funds for Personal Protective Equipment for keyworkers. The biggest problems related to: Indian students, of which there were a lot in the UK; elderly people; and funerals.
- When the Jain temples were closed, there were no donations for paying priests. It would be helpful if there were some guidance on how places of worship could cope in such circumstances.

7. Dr Crabtree said that the issue of the major financial challenges facing places of worship was one of the issues that had been raised by her at a recent MHCLG roundtable. Following the Circular that IFN had sent out on 27 March asking member bodies to send in any concerns to be raised at the present meeting, the 'digital gap' had been raised, as had a concern about the food being put into emergency food parcels and whether this was suitable for some faith community needs.

Agenda Item 5: Places of worship

8. Bishop Clark drew attention to the information in the Annotated Agenda about places of worship. He noted that there had been some suggestions of places of worship not abiding by the Government's guidelines, but it was understood that most were doing so.
9. In discussion the following points were made:
 - Hindu temples were closed for worship but in some areas their kitchens were being used to prepare food parcels. They needed to provide emotional support for a lot of devotees. From a recent virtual meeting of the Mayor of London with faith leaders it was understood that the Mayor was trying to get funding for faith communities wishing to provide food parcels and other aid. The Hindu Forum of Britain was asking communities what their needs were. Any funding received for aid could not be put towards, for example, salaries for priests or maintenance. Dr Crabtree said that there appeared to have been some differences between the Government's initial guidance and guidance issued by local authorities regarding the closure of places of worship. As noted in the Annotated Agenda, the Government guidance on the closure of places of worship had now been updated to set out the specific exceptions that were permitted. For example, priests were allowed to enter to perform an act of worship. A number of concerns had been raised with IFN: if priests were holding services, devotees might force their way in; some of the older generation were feeling very disenfranchised and finding it hard to stay away from places of worship; and insurance and security issues, for example priests being attacked or faith community property being stolen. It was also understood that some groups within faith communities were refusing not to meet. Bishop Clark said that many churches had found that closing the doors entirely was the only way to keep people away.
 - The Chief Rabbi and the Board of Deputies of British Jews had been very clear and synagogues were closed across the community. There were many for whom prayer together was very important as both an emotional and religious act. It was therefore very hard to come to terms with that not happening. However, there were clear edicts across the whole community that people should not come together to pray. There was a concept in the Jewish faith, and other faiths, of the need to save a life. It was therefore imperative to stay away. The Jewish prayer recited by the bereaved could only be said in a group, so that was now not possible. People could not be together for Passover. There were a lot of religious challenges, but the synagogues as buildings were totally closed.
 - Some people were flouting rules on the basis that God would keep them safe. In the Hindu tradition there was an understanding that God would help, but you had to help yourself first.
 - For Methodists, fellowship was very important as a means of grace. However, Ministers were not even performing acts of worship in churches, they were instead broadcasting these from home. Some churches had remained open, for example where they provided foodbanks or night shelters, and these were operating within the guidelines. Bishop Clark said that in Croydon some churches which ran foodbanks or refugee day centres had, sadly, closed their doors completely.
 - The Salvation Army had many volunteers who were classed as vulnerable, so they had needed to curtail resources in line with the number of volunteers available. They were trying to link up with other foodbanks in local areas. Some

local authorities had commandeered Salvation Army buildings for storage. There had been a big reduction in donations to foodbanks by the public but some supermarkets were donating directly. Faith communities were working together, in similar ways to the aftermath of the Grenfell tragedy, which was very encouraging.

Agenda Item 6: Burial and cremation

10. Dr Crabtree said that when the emergency Coronavirus Bill had been drafted it had not included guidance that religious wishes should be taken into account at times of decision making about disposal of the body of the deceased. New wording had been included following strong input from the Jewish and Muslim communities. The new wording was profoundly important from the perspective of all faith communities. She added that IFN's Co-Chairs had also raised the significance of this in the context of communication with MHCLG about the important work of faith communities generally at this time and issues of concern to them. It was helpful that the Bill had been amended, but discussion was understood to be ongoing about how local authorities would come to their judgements about what is "a way that appears consistent with the person's religion or beliefs if known". For instance, would families convey their wishes, would there be input from chaplaincy teams or faith community experts? There were also questions over how bodies were washed for burial and whether bodies could be left for a few days while prayers were said, rather than being contained immediately to prevent exposure. Bishop Clark noted that the Bill required local authorities "to have regard to" wishes. While that was not legally binding it did mean that there had to be a very good reason for not taking the wishes into account.

11. In discussion the following points were made:
 - The Board of Deputies of British Jews had been satisfied with the outcome of the amendments to the Coronavirus Bill. It had reflected the concerns of its community about the legislation and it had been pleased to support the amendments proposed by MPs Naz Shah and Wes Streeting. There had been good inter faith solidarity between Jewish and Muslim communities in particular. The United Synagogues had closed all cemeteries' to the public and mandated that only close family were allowed to attend funerals. Liberal and Reform Judaism had said that only clergy could attend funerals with no mourners present at all.
 - The Hindu Forum of Britain had been working with the Funeral Directors Association. It was not possible for relatives or priests to perform last rites or to visit the deceased. Funeral directors were themselves performing some of the requirements, including, for example, clothing the body correctly and putting a small lamp inside the coffin. Usually there were up to 13 days of prayers and rituals at a deceased person's home, so it was very difficult not being allowed to gather. Some priests were guiding people virtually through weblinks.
 - The United Reformed Church was holding update meetings every Monday. At the most recent meeting it had been reported that in Leeds they had moved to direct cremation and burial with no service at all; and also that Glasgow crematorium was finding it challenging to cope because so many staff were self-isolating. If the number of deaths continued to increase, even what was currently happening might no longer be manageable. In normal times a priest would be able to perform last rites for someone in intensive care, but it was not clear whether this was possible and they were trying to find out more about the position

on deathbed prayer provision. Bishop Clark said that he was aware that a hospital chaplain had been able to go into an intensive care unit in his area once or twice, but this had been a huge undertaking and therefore could not be a regular event.

- In Harrow, where the Zoroastrian Centre was based, the local authority recognised the Zoroastrians and was aware of the community's requirements for disposal of the dead. However, Zoroastrians did not appear on the local hospital database as a faith community, which was making people even more anxious. Some priests were worried they could be stopped by council officials. The Centre was closed but the after death ceremonies were taking place behind closed doors. Spiritual solace needed to be given to the bereaved. This was a problem for all smaller communities about which not as much was known. Bishop Clark said that there was provision for the relevant authorities to say that religious workers were performing essential duties, including religious workers. The question, however, was who gave that authority. Might it be worthwhile IFN's Co-Chairs producing a document saying which faith community bodies were member bodies of IFN and part of recognised religions in the UK? Dr Crabtree said that IFN could say which faith community organisations were in membership of it but there was not an official list of recognised religions. It might be possible, however, to produce more general material for IFN's website.

12. Dr Crabtree said that a big issue was what would happen if people became upset by judgments made by local authorities about, for example, in what order people were buried, when bodies were released, and how much time was allowed in the crematorium. She noted that when the Jewish and Muslim communities had been lobbying for the important amendments to the Coronavirus Bill there had been some very unpleasant comments on social media. There was a real case for having careful explanation about the importance of burial and cremation and understanding of this in different faith communities. Maybe there was something that needed to be said together.

Rabbi Mason and Anthony Silkoff and Karl Wightman left the meeting.

13. In further discussion the following points were made:
- Faith communities should be encouraged to work with local councils now to help them to understand the issues, rather than when they were under more pressure.
 - A person or their family should make a clear list of bullet points about the expected treatment of the patient and their needs when they die. This could be kept with their patient notes and a copy with their GP. Faith leaders should help their members to make the point clearly and courteously to overworked GPs.
 - Communities would need to be inventive in creating memorial services when the pandemic was over.
 - In the Buddhist community, although they could not physically attend funerals, they were communicating on Skype and still chanting and performing rituals. The London Buddhist Vihara was offering puja chanting and meditation every evening online for the community, especially those who were isolated, and up to 300 people had been taking part.

Agenda Item 7: Other issues

14. Dr Crabtree said that, as noted earlier, one of the concerns that had been raised by an IFN member body was that the food being put into emergency food parcels was

not always suitable for some faith community needs. The member body thought that the guidance from MHCLG seemed to dissuade local authorities from making adjustments.

15. The FCF agreed that it would be helpful to raise this concern with MHCLG, as there was no point in providing food for people that they could not eat.

Agenda Item 8: Financial and management matters

16. Dr Crabtree said that faith communities, places of worship and charities were facing incredibly difficult income loss. NCVO and the wider charity sector was encouraging people to write to the Chancellor, Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, to Baroness Diana Barran, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Minister for Civil Society, DCMS, and to local MPs to say that they were aware that this was a very difficult time and were supportive of all the efforts to help people, but that their charity might close without help. A lot of charities were facing sudden closure due to cashflow problems. After the present meeting, IFN's Co-Chairs would be writing in those terms. One of the further difficulties was that Government funding would not normally go to support the running expenses of places of worship. Where the running of places of worship was tied into community centres/service delivery this made it more complicated. There were two questions: firstly, how did charities and voluntary sector organisations make their voices heard to get a support package similar to that offered to businesses? Secondly, how could it be ensured that faith-based organisations were not automatically precluded from receiving funding?
17. In discussion the following points were made:
 - For Methodist Churches, the issue was not so much related to a drop in donations from the congregations, as many gave by standing order. The issue was mainly a loss of income through renting out buildings to the community. Often churches hosted foodbanks. Some churches would be facing closure without support.
 - Many Hindu temples were used as community centres. The Government should provide help with salaries for priests and staff teams as they were still working. This time of the year saw one of the biggest festival periods in the Dharmic calendar which often generated a lot of income. There would therefore be great losses.
18. Dr Crabtree said that the following day there was due to be a meeting of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Select Committee of the House of Commons. As she had said, the NCVO was advising charities to send letters about the impact of COVID-19 on their finances and ability to carry out their work to the Chancellor the Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, to Baroness Diana Barran, Parliamentary Under-Secretary, DCMS, and to local MPs. It could be helpful to send the letters in before the Select Committee met.

Agenda Item 9: Possible statement by the Co-Chairs and FCF Moderators

19. Dr Crabtree said that the statement-making group had been sent a draft statement by the Co-Chairs. The statement: noted that faith communities were united in their support to help everyone get through this terrible crisis; thanked NHS and other keyworkers; recognised the efforts made by faith communities through their volunteers and ministers; talked about the potential issues around extremism;

flagged the issues relating to burial and cremation; and ended with a positive statement about coming through the crisis more connected and stronger. This would be taken forward by the Co-Chairs and Moderators but it was helpful for the FCF to be aware of it and if there were any particular points that it wished considered for members to be able to make these.

20. No comments were offered. The position was noted.

Agenda Item 10: Any Other Business

21. The following issues were raised:

- The recent bombing at the Kabul gurdwara had been very distressing for the Sikh community. This has been a sustained attack for nearly 3 days and the youngest casualty was only 3 years old. The Sikh community had been going through a very difficult time in Afghanistan. In the late 1980s there had been nearly half a million Sikhs living there. Now there were only around 300 families. The media in the UK had understandably been dominated by COVID-19 and not paid much attention to the bombing so not many people were aware of it. Sikhs risked their lives by sheltering Muslims and those of other faiths, but their community was being massacred. Bishop Clark said that the bombing had been terrible and that IFN's Co-Chairs had put out a message.
- It was good to remember that inter faith activity continued during these times. A Christian member of the FCF noted that they had been invited to join a Muslim community of about 400 people online throughout the UK to listen in to their discussions about the issues they were facing and to give encouraging commentary and to share and compare; and ultimately for everyone to be able to set the concrete actions in the here and now within the frameworks that all religious traditions point to. It was good to be able to have the understanding that that could bring, to support others and bear wider witness in the current environment, in which there was fear and also some dangerous conspiracy theories.
- At a recent virtual DCMS roundtable, an important issue had been raised around spontaneous volunteering and safeguarding. Firstly, the volunteers themselves might be in a vulnerable position, but, secondly, people might be purporting to be volunteers and then attempting to steal or defraud others.
- When faith communities asked their members to help, they had to give them the right advice and equipment, such as personal protective equipment.
- The current crisis was the most desperate time for mankind since the Second World War. It was very helpful to share yoga, chanting and meditation online, for people of all ages and for those who were isolated.

22. Dr Crabtree said that the FCF was not due to meet again until late June. It was, however, such a fast moving situation and there was a great deal to learn from one another. It was not clear whether members had the time or wished to have more regular meetings. It might be good to look at a way to explore sharing how organisations were tackling particular issues. There was something very powerful about faith communities coming together at local, national and UK level to tackle the crisis. It was useful to follow IFN on Facebook and Twitter as a lot of good practice was being shared through this. IFN could perhaps boost its website resources. IFN had already put up faith community guidance information. It could also add material about good practice and stories, exemplifying the powerfulness of faith communities

working together. It would be helpful for people to be able to see what other groups were already doing and then to connect with them. IFN could also provide links to the good practice guidance on websites of bodies such as NCVO and the Charity Commission. The IFN office would look at what might be specific to faith and inter faith contexts and consider across the next week or so what could be done. It was agreed that it would be helpful if the IFN office explored this.

Action: IFN office to explore possible further material for IFN website.

Agenda Item 11: Date of next meeting

23. Bishop Clark noted that the next meeting was due to be held on Thursday 25 June.
24. A query was raised about whether, given the rapidly changing scene, a meeting could be held sooner. Dr Crabtree said that this was under consideration. IFN had its own challenges on the resourcing front as it came to the funding year end. It would, though, be possible to build in extra virtual meetings and she would speak with the Co-Chairs and Co-Moderators about that.
25. A moment of silence was observed.
26. Bishop Clark thanked everyone for attending and for their contributions and also IFN staff for their preparation for the meeting.

21 April 2020