

THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK

MINUTES OF VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE FAITH COMMUNITIES FORUM

from 11am to 1pm on Tuesday 10 October 2023

via Zoom

Co-Moderators: The Revd Canon Hilary Barber and Rabbi Mordechai Wollenberg.

Present: Judith Baker (Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations); Ms Shahin Bekhradnia (World Zoroastrian Organisation); Ervad Yazad Bhadha (Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe); Dr Desmond Biddulph CBE (Buddhist Society and FCF Moderator); 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 / Churches Together in England); Major David Evans (Salvation Army); Ms Elizabeth Harris-Sawczenko (Board of Deputies of British Jews); Ms Doral Hayes (Churches Together in England); Ms Prudence Jones (Pagan Federation); Mr Hassan Joudi (Muslim Council of Britain); Mr Rajnish Kashyap (Hindu Council (UK)); Mr John Marder (Network of Buddhist Organisations (UK)); Mrs Edit McCathie (Baha'i Community of the UK); Ms Smita Oza (BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha); Mr Neil Pitchford (Druid Network and FCF Moderator); Ms Trupti Patel (Hindu Forum of Britain); Mr Satnam Singh Poonian (Network of Sikh Organisations (UK) and FCF Moderator); Dr Riaz Sanatian (Baha'i Community of the UK and FCF Moderator); the Most Venerable Bogoda Seelawimala (Sri Lankan Sangha Sabha of GB); Mr Vinay Shah (Institute of Jainology and FCF Moderator); Dr Vinaya Sharma (Vishwa Hindu Parishad (UK)); Mr Kevin Snyman (United Reformed Church in the UK); and Mr Elliot Vanstone (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales).

Apologies: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Inter Faith Council for Wales; Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board; Spiritualists' National Union; and the World Ahlul-Bayt Islamic League.

Moderator apologies: Minster Julia Almond; Miss Sabira Lakha; and Ms Tracey Prior.

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

Ms Colette Bennett (Charity Commission) [for Agenda Item 8]

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 on the IFN website once agreed by it. The minutes follow FCF's agreed style: 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, for example where the faith of the contributor is relevant to the meaning (when the faith may be noted), or 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. The Revd Canon Hilary Barber, in the chair, welcomed those present and in particular those attending a meeting of the IFN Faith Communities Forum (FCF) for the first time. He said that, as FCF members had been notified by email, Miss Sabira Lakha had now been appointed as the Vice-Moderator from the Muslim community. She had sent her apologies for the present meeting as she was currently abroad.
2. Organisational and Moderator apologies were noted.
3. A period of silence was observed, keeping in mind all those working for inter faith understanding and cooperation, some of whom were working in difficult places at this time.
4. Canon Barber explained, for the benefit of new members, that the FCF was a forum for discussion of current issues of interest and concern rather than a decision-making body. It enabled sharing of views and good practice and networking. 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 follow the usual style. Anyone wishing not to be included in screenshots of the meeting should indicate.

Agenda Item 2: Brief roundtable introductions

5. Those present introduced themselves briefly.

INTER FAITH NETWORK MATTERS SESSION

[Paragraphs 6 to 11]

MAIN SESSION

Note: An additional item was added to the Agenda at this point.

12. Canon Barber said that FCF members were clearly all very mindful of what had been unfolding in the Middle East across the last few days. It was a very sensitive issue for faith communities at home and abroad. He was grateful to the Executive Director for helping explore with the Co-Chairs and FCF Moderators whether a statement might be appropriate and on what lines. There had been much work across the last 48 hours to try to explore that. The reality was that a consensus had not been reached. As a result of that, the decision had been taken not to make any statement. The IFN office had emailed the statement-making Moderators to explain the position that had been reached. He hoped that everyone understood how complex and difficult the situation was. He thanked the Moderators for their input. People of faith would want, at this time, to pray for the situation in the Middle East and to uphold everyone who had been affected.

13. Dr Crabtree said that it was kind of Canon Barber to have thanked her. However, where statements were concerned, it was a part of her job to support people and work with them to find a mode of expression that they together thought were right. When that did not happen – and sometimes it did not - that had to be respected. The absence of the statement never meant, in the case of IFN, that a matter was not taken seriously. It simply meant that the right words or the right moment had not presented and it was sometimes better to say nothing than to say something that might be seen as lukewarm or potentially inflammatory, even when not intended as such. Across IFN's history, faith communities had sometimes experienced difficulties in the UK in the context of overseas events. Statements had been issued where it was thought both appropriate and helpful. They were not always issued and sometimes, no matter what care was taken over wording, there was the possibility that a statement might cause problems outweighing any potential helpfulness. In the present instance, it was not just a matter of a single Moderator having reservations. There had been different appraisals of the desirability of issuing a statement (as well as of some forms of words), including from one Moderator who judged that there were those within the organisation to which he was linked who would read any framing of the statement as political and therefore not supportable. The situation was a very difficult and painful one.
14. Canon Barber said the time allocated for the present meeting could be filled with members expressing their sorrow for the situation, given the extent of that. However, it was important to allow anybody who wished to make a comment to be able to do so, because that was why the FCF existed. Members were there to listen to one another and to be able to express their thoughts.
15. The following points were made. A response from the Executive Director is in italics.
- In the circumstances, the correct position had been reached. Sometimes it was best not to say things which could aggravate the situation. However, as human beings, people were suffering from both sides. The FCF member expressed sympathies and prayer for a very speedy resolution of the situation. Their heart went out to all the sufferers, the children, the women and men who were experiencing the horrendous situation at the moment.
 - The Hindu community offered prayers to everyone, regardless of their faith and the loss. It was important to offer something to the thousands of people who had been killed. This was not a small matter, even not comparing what happened in Syria a few years back or what's happening in Russia. Everybody was in tears, everybody was praying, everybody was hoping that the situation would be resolved. Prayers were very useful and were being held in many places of worship. But, as an inter faith organisation, IFN needed to aim to work with all the communities and the speaker thought that IFN should issue a statement that its member faith communities believed in peace. It would be good if the Moderators could come together to find wording. The faith communities had to be seen as working together. This was the right time for it.
Under its policy on making statements, IFN did not make statements on overseas events.
 - The FCF member said that, on a personal note, it was a very difficult time. The news had come in during a Jewish festival. One of their own sons was currently in Israel studying. Whatever might be going on abroad, there was no doubt that, again, what might be framed as a conflict in the Middle East was being conflated with Jews around the world. He had just seen a video of people outside Sydney Opera House shouting 'Gas the Jews'. That had nothing to do with Israel.

Members of the Jewish community, certainly where he lived, were afraid to go about their lawful daily business. There had been an attack on a kosher restaurant in London. There had been footage of people in central London cheering the murder of hundreds of Israelis. It was chilling. Local Jewish communities were afraid and concerned. Their son's school had sent a note out saying that the boys should not wear their kippah on the train to school; they should wear a cap. They had said to their son, "You should do what you feel is right. For what it's worth, I feel that the moment you have to cover your identity, we should leave the country." They felt that for them to say that as a British Jew was unbelievable. So, whatever was going on and whoever's fault it was and whoever started whatever they started, the reality was that these events spilled over. And there were threats and are rhetoric which were causing fear and panic, which should not be happening in 2023. Whether one's local Jewish community supported Israel or not was irrelevant. They were in pain. They might well have family members and friends who had been murdered. But they were also afraid to go about their lawful daily business. They were afraid to go to their place of worship. They had spoken with someone who was afraid to go to a funeral because they felt that the cemetery was a dangerous place because of terror threats. It was important to know that the great suffering was this fear that in the West in 2023 the Jewish community had to be afraid for its very survival. That was not an unfounded fear when there were people in the streets shouting 'Death to the Jews' and 'Gas the Jews'. It was a very frightening time. The community appreciated the support. The best support that could be given was unequivocal support. There had been good messages in his local area from our other faith communities. The community did not want to hear about the Middle East and who was going to solve the Middle East peace process. That was not going to happen over here. But it was important to know, and to be sensitive to the fact that, local Jewish communities were afraid, quite rightly so, and they felt prevented from their lawful daily business.

- Sikhs, like Jews, were also a very visible community and understood the implications of that. That did not mean that they should hide their identity. Everyone was privileged to be part of a multicultural, multi religious society, which God had created as a powerful message that no one was the same, but all were people in God's eyes. The policy that all Moderators had to agree before a statement was issued was a good one, because that made it a more powerful statement with more impact. So, in this situation, if agreement could not be reached, then it was best not to issue a statement.
- Political people would exploit their religious identity and it was important to be careful where one placed oneself. There had to be some kind of trust. There should be prayers for all communities. There were people from all over the world living in the UK. IFN's focus was on the UK. The world had now been reduced to a global village, so events happening around the world had impacts in the UK. It was important to be careful, to build trust, to have faith in God, to get along with one another, and to support one another and the Muslim community and Jewish community in this very difficult situation, so that the situation remained calm in the UK and people could live in harmony.

16. Dr Crabtree said that it might be possible, in the coming few days, to highlight, in a non-statement mode, relevant IFN resources and to raise awareness of some of the issues, such as how to act in times of tension and how to help, bearing in mind some of the points made in discussion.

17. Canon Barber thanked everyone who had contributed during the discussion. The reflections had all been very powerful.

Action: Executive Director to speak with Co-Chairs and FCF Co-Moderators about highlighting relevant IFN resources and raising awareness of some of the issues.

Agenda Item 6: National faith communities and inter faith / inter religious engagement

18. Canon Barber said that the meeting would now be moving on to the third in its series of explorations of how different UK/national faith communities were taking forward inter faith dialogue and engagement. He welcomed Mr Elliot Vanstone, Mission Adviser at the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, who would be speaking about its work on inter religious relations at local, national and international level.
19. Mr Elliot Vanstone thanked IFN for inviting him to speak to the meeting. A copy of his PowerPoint slides is at Annex A. His presentation points are below.

Meeting God in Friend and Stranger

- I work in the three strands of mission: ecumenism, evangelisation and interreligious dialogue.
- At the February FCF meeting I alluded to a document that the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales released in 2010 entitled *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger*. [Slide 1] This was designed to be a teaching document on Interreligious Dialogue and still maintains a significant impact.
- The document reminds Catholics that they are called by their Baptism to engage in dialogue with others, and specifically with people of other religions. This is part of the Church's task of continuing the dialogue that God engages with His Church, and of reading the signs of His will in our times.
- The document stresses that this dialogue is not restricted to academics but takes place where everyday life is shared in an atmosphere of respect and openness. Shared experiences of worship – where the worship takes the form not of coming to pray together, but of coming together to pray, is also a valuable aspect of dialogue, and one which meets appropriately the desire to share occasions of grief, joy, and remembrance.
- *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger* invites Catholics to enter dialogue with members of other religions. This is important for two reasons:
 1. Our faith in God prompts us to journey with others to his Truth which is revealed when we open our hearts to the Spirit.
 2. There is a need to clarify the vision of Religion, or the purpose of promoting peace.
- The aim of the document is to highlight that dialogue is bigger than discussion of concepts, important though they are. It is a frame of mind or an attitude that allows us to live with others as good neighbours. It is a response to the call to be Christ to others, and to listen as well as to serve Christ in others.
- It is important to acknowledge that people of multicultural Britain have different religious needs and an improved communication enables many to learn what is going on in various parts of the world more quickly. The Catholic Church has become more tolerated by the political establishment and has been enriched by this multi-racial community.

- The church promotes respect for dialogue with the many cultures, religions, philosophies, and outlooks on life. The commitment to dialogue stems from the conviction that God can be seen working in other religions.
- The document itself contains recommendations where the Bishops of England and Wales encourage Catholics to be living witnesses to the love of neighbour in being the voice of the voiceless, even on facing hostility. And this involves collaborating with members of other religions in fields where they have similar concerns and values.
- The document encourages us to invite other faiths to join us in our social work, especially where injustice to Christians needs to be addressed. This can also involve working together to support the civil authorities in upholding values that ensures the common good.
- The document also encourages inter-religious prayer and dialogue. Since prayer is an expression of our belief, in dialogue, we do not come to pray together but we come together to pray. The document gives some helpful practical suggestions and guidelines for multi-religious prayer.
- *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger* is a document that is utilised daily in this country for interreligious dialogue. [Slide 2] And the significance of this document is surmised in the words of Cardinal Vincent Nichols in the foreword:

“In Britain today we are engaged in a process of learning how to construct and live in a society made up of people of many different faiths. This is a process from which no-one is excused.”
- These are quite strong words, but they have impacted dialogue for the past 13 years and will continue to do so.

International perspective

- From an international perspective, church documents, such as *Nostra Aetate* and *Redemptoris Missio*, and the inter-religious activities of the Popes since Vatican II have shown the Church's commitment to a relationship of mutual understanding and reciprocal enrichment with other religions. [Slide 3] The purpose of this commitment is to promote, by word and example, unity, charity, and peace among people.
- Interreligious dialogue is considered an important commitment of the Catholic Church, as affirmed by the Second Vatican Council and the Church recognises the value and truth present in other religions and has a high regard for their ways of life, conduct, precepts, and doctrines.
- The Church's engagement in interreligious dialogue is not a recent development but has been a preoccupation for some time. The Church has established structures such as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue to facilitate dialogue with other religious traditions. The goal of this dialogue is for every believer to engage in dialogue with believers of other religions, striving for mutual understanding and building bridges.
- The Catholic Church's commitment to interreligious dialogue is rooted in the recognition of the necessity of dialogue in the present situation of the world. The Church acknowledges that dialogue between followers of different religions is an important means of cooperating for the common good. Through dialogue, Christians can enlighten and be enlightened by the faithful of other religions, fostering a common pursuit of truth in different areas of life.
- The Catholic Church follows the path of engagement and dialogue with other religions out of a genuine sense of respect for them and their beliefs. Catholics work to build bridges of friendship, heal past wrongs, and foster trust between individuals and communities of different faiths. The Church sees dialogue as an

opportunity to share spiritual riches, speak of experiences of prayer and contemplation, and express the joy of encountering others in faith.

Pope Francis and inter faith work

- As many of you will be aware, our current Pope, Pope Francis, is a massive champion of interreligious dialogue, and has been very vocal on the importance of dialogue. [Slide 4] Only recently in 2022 he was quoted as saying, “Interreligious dialogue is a sign of the times,” adding that he considers it “a providential sign, in the sense that God Himself, in His wise plan, has inspired, in religious leaders and in many others, the desire to encounter and come to know one another in a way respectful of religious differences.”
- His 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, highlights what he believes is a renewal of importance from interreligious dialogue. [Slide 5]
- *Fratelli Tutti* is a reflection on dialogue, and, in fact, it is the first major papal document after Vatican II primarily arising from interreligious experiences, having interreligious dialogue and cooperation as its impetus, and embracing religious pluralism as context for investigating fraternity and social friendship. *Fratelli Tutti* is the long-awaited encyclical on interreligious relations and dialogue.
- The true message of *Fratelli Tutti* is the universal scope of human fraternity, and the openness of every woman and man to a dialogue that is motivated by love.
- Because religion serves an essential purpose for so many in our world, Pope Francis urges us, in an effort to restore human fraternity, to accompany one another “as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all.” (8)
- The document itself is best summarised by the last sentence, “In the name of God and of everything stated thus far, [we] declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard.” (285)
- That provides a new framework moving forward and something we, here in England and Wales are trying to reciprocate at a national level.

Interreligious work in the UK

- Our interreligious dialogue work in the UK falls under the Department of Dialogue and Unity which is chaired by Archbishop Bernard Longley and is supported by the Mission directorate, which is where I work. [Slide 6]
- The department itself works for Christian Unity through instruments such as CTBI (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland), CTE (Churches Together in England) and Cytûn (Churches Together in Wales).
- The department also works together to build the relationship between the Church and the Jewish people whilst promoting an increased understanding of the Jewish roots of Christianity and working to eradicate antisemitism.
- The third workstream is dialogue with other religions and members of the department work extensively in promoting understanding and highlighting different ways we can meet God in friend and stranger.
- The two main members of the department involved in interreligious dialogue are Bishop Patrick Mckinney, Bishop of Nottingham and Cardinal Michael Fitzgerald who previously worked in the Pontifical Council for interreligious dialogue.

Local and regional perspectives

- From a local perspective we have an extensive group of coordinators and one of these groups is interreligious. [Slide 7] We hope to have at least one person

working on interreligious matters in each of the 22 Dioceses of England and Wales. At the moment we have had a couple of people moving on to other jobs or volunteering elsewhere so sadly we do not have someone for every diocese, but we are working closely with the diocesan bishops to appoint someone.

- We meet with these coordinators twice a year, virtually and in-person whatever is appreciated most at the time. And Bishop Patrick and Cardinal Michael also attend this to discuss what work has been going on at a local level. This opportunity is massively appreciated by our coordinators.
- I thought I would take my last section to talk about some of the interreligious work that is currently happening by highlighting two regional initiatives.
- The first one is the successful formation and work of the Birmingham Faith leaders. The Faith Leaders' Group was formed in 2001 in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York, when the leaders of the city's principal faith communities came together to show solidarity, proclaiming that religious faith is a unifying, not a dividing force. They have continued to meet on a regular basis (normally every second month) to build positive connections between people of faith across the city. The Faith Leaders' Group currently has members from each of Birmingham's six major world faiths: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. The group has released statements and worked together on many different initiatives ranging from responses to the COVID 19 pandemic to the environment.
- The second initiative reaped the fruits of its work earlier this year when Pope Francis held a private audience with faith and civic leaders from Greater Manchester to discuss how Manchester is tackling the climate emergency, and to make a formal commitment to working together to protect our planet and to care for our brothers and sisters around the world. [Slide 8] In attendance was Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham, The Lord Mayor of Manchester Donna Ludford, among others. Representatives from the Sikh and Hindu communities also joined the delegation, as well as Rabbi Robyn Ashworth Steen, from the Manchester Reform Synagogue, and city-centre Methodist Minister Revd Ian Rutherford. The audience provided the cross-faith group with a rare opportunity to receive guidance and support from the Holy Father, as they discussed how faith can provide the foundation for a future of sustainability and fraternity, whilst learning more about how the principles set out in *Laudato Si'* could guide our community in making this future a reality.
- Both these initiatives exemplify the success of continued interreligious dialogue in the UK and there are many more examples. We are also members of the Christian Muslim Forum, and work closely with the Council of Christians and Jews. We also support CAFOD and Caritas in their interreligious work.
- Catholic chaplains also minister alongside their fellow chaplains in ecumenical and multi-religious situations. In some chaplaincies understanding is promoted by means of interreligious projects based on common concerns such as the environment.

20. Canon Barber thanked Mr Vanstone and invited any questions or comments.

21. In discussion the following points were made. Responses from Mr Vanstone are in italics.

- It had been fascinating to hear about CBCEW's work in this area. Had there been any push back from the tension between genuine outreach and evangelising and, if so, how was that dealt with?

People could sometimes think that the aim was to proselytise, but it had been directed by the Catholic Bishops that at any first meeting it should be made clear that it was not about proselytising. Inter religious dialogue was a fundamental part of evangelisation as a whole. Everyone was struggling, so it was important to work together. Any dialogue was always framed with openness. There was a clear understanding that when they left the room they would still be Catholics and those from other faiths would still be from their faiths. It was one of the main themes running through Meeting God in Friend and Stranger. One of the reasons for producing the document had been to clear up those types of misunderstandings.

- It was good to know that it was about 'dialogue' and not 'debate'. That was also an approach taken by the Faith & Belief Forum. There was a fine line between evangelism and trying to understand and respect one other. The FCF member's grandfather and father used to tell them about Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who was a Sikh Emperor in Punjab, which at that time was majority Muslims and Hindus. One of the Maharaja's directions was that whenever one passed in front of a place of worship, one should bow one's head. That was the respect that kept people together and the FCF member still did this. A few years ago Maharaja Singh had been named the 'Greatest Leader of All Time' in a poll conducted by BBC World Histories Magazine. People believed in God and that was the connecting factor. How one prayed and practised did not really matter. People of faith could all learn from each other. The FCF member had learned a lot from people of other faiths and put that into their own practice. There was value in that. Learning from each other and respecting each other was very important.

Respect was very important. This had been highlighted, for instance, when the Cardinal had invited religious representatives to a service at Westminster Cathedral in remembrance of Pope Benedict, and had seated them at the front. Such moments demonstrated how inter religious work played out on a large scale.

22. Canon Barber thanked Mr Vanstone again for his presentation.

Agenda Item 7: Inter faith engagement of faith communities

23. Rabbi Mordechai Wollenberg, taking the chair, invited members to share any news of recent or forthcoming inter faith engagement, including on social issues, or any planned Inter Faith Week events.

24. In discussion the following points were made. Responses from the Executive Director are in italics.

- The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (UK) Centre in Ilford had been encouraging people to get back together since the pandemic, especially children. By the time they became adults, their ideas had become fixed. So, the temple was concentrating on working with children, helping them to accept one another. There had been an unfortunate incident at the temple during a school visit. Two young friends had been sitting together and one of their mothers had told them they could not because they were of a different religion. Inter faith work should start at a young age.
- Redbridge Faith Forum (to which the speaker had a connection) would be holding its Annual Walk of Peace in October. Each year this included visiting several places of worship, with a short talk at each place about beliefs and practices and also sharing food in some places. That kind of event each year helped in building the community and helped to focus on seeing each other as human beings. It was important to communicate with each other at a human level.

- The Hindu Council (UK) was continuing to be proactive in raising awareness of organ donation and blood donation. Some of this was in partnership with South Asian Health Action. They were now also doing some work on breast cancer awareness. Last week there had been discussion about how a family member could donate a liver, which many people did not know was possible. The speakers at events were often donors and recipients, which made what they were saying more powerful. Awareness campaigns were very important and relevant to all faith communities.

It was hoped that organ donation would be on the agenda for the next FCF meeting.

- Sikh communities were encouraged to give blood and donate organs. It was made clear that the blood would go to people of all faiths, not just to other Sikhs. The story went that when Guru Nanak's father gave him money to do some business, he had seen some poor people on the way and had instead given the money to them because his idea was that business should make society better. So, all gurdwaras provided vegetarian langar all year round. Langar Week had been held in the West Midlands from 2 to 8 October. Langars were available throughout the UK. Anyone of any faith could come to a gurdwara and be fed. Faith communities could do a lot of good.
- Locally, there were often one or two requests for the Jewish community to speak to pupils during Inter Faith Week. Was there much interest from schools in Inter Faith Week nationally and were they reaching out to faith communities for resources?

IFN did extensive work with schools on Inter Faith Week. Participation by schools in the Week had increased by 47% in 2022.

INTER FAITH NETWORK MATTERS SESSION

[Paragraphs 25 to 27]

MAIN SESSION

Ms Colette Bennett joined the meeting.

Agenda Item 8: Faith communities campaigning on social issues - parameters; and principles for cross-faith campaigning

28. Rabbi Wollenberg welcomed Ms Colette Bennett, Charities Engagement Manager at the Charity Commission. She would be giving a brief introduction to the Commission's faith engagement work and talking about requirements for registered charities when campaigning, including in the context of elections.
29. Ms Colette Bennett thanked IFN for inviting her to speak. A copy of her PowerPoint slides is at Annex B. A summary of her presentation is below:
 - [Slide 1] The Charity Commission is the regulator and registrar for charities in England and Wales. There are separate regulators for Scotland and Northern Ireland. It was established in 1853. Today it has about 500 staff across four sites in Liverpool, London, Newport and Taunton.
 - The Commission's scope is to:
 - Maintain the public register of charities
 - Provide general advice and guidance on proper and effective administration of charities

- Confer regulatory advice and consents, if appropriate, for example if a charity needs to do something not currently covered by charity law or its governing documents
- Monitor, investigate and remedy misconduct and maladministration and lack of compliance in charities, and act to protect charity property
- Obtain, evaluate and disseminate public information about charities, partly through information on the public register, partly through the Annual Return that charities have to submit each year and partly through separate research
- [Slide 2] There are currently approximately 168,000 charities on the register, with an overall income of £88 billion, which is the equivalent GDP of a small country. Trust and confidence in charities is very important because if that is lost then all the financial and volunteer help can be damaged. Across those charities there are nearly 1 million Trustees, with responsibility for making decisions and managing them. About 19,000 charities operate overseas, including faith charities.
- [Slide 3] There are about 35,000 charities on the register with a religious activity object. There are also a number that are not on the register because some of the major denominations are excepted from registering at the moment though that will change in due course and they will be required to register. The faith charities on the register have about 220,000 Trustees managing them and last year they spent about £10.24 billion on their activities.
- [Slide 4] Thomas Yih is head of the Charities Engagement Team. There are three Charities Engagement Officers (two in the Liverpool office and one in the London office). They will shortly be recruiting for a Charities Engagement Assistant.
- [Slide 5] The Commission is a risk-based regulator. It recognises that Trustees are the first line of defence in managing risks and dealing with harm relating to their charities. The role of the Commission as regulator is to ensure that Trustees are doing that. It provides guidance and support for them to do so. This includes in-person events and webinars. There are currently waiting lists for all the events for faith charities in November, but it is a rolling programme so the same events will be run again across the next year. Events are advertised [online](#), usually about 6 weeks in advance.
- The Commission also assists through inputting into guidance and policy, attending events such as the present FCF meeting and issuing regulatory alerts which highlight particular risks, issues or threats for particular types of charities.
- [Slide 6] The cornerstone of successful charities lies in their governance. The Commission produces a guidance document on '[Managing faith charities as trustees](#)'. That covers everything from setting up and registering a faith charity to topics such as faith leaders as trustees and dealing with conflicts of interest. It is based on consultation with the faith sector and based on what people said they were interested to know more about.
- [Slide 7] The Commission's [Campaigning and political activity guidance for charities](#) was refreshed in November 2022. The Commission also published a '5-minute guide' on the topic last year. It has produced '5-minute guides' on most topics that Trustees need to know about. Most of the guidance documents also have a video version as well. The key principles underpinning the approach in the updated version of the guidance have not changed. It is designed to help trustees make confident decisions about what they can and cannot do in this area.
- [Slide 8] Faith charities have a long history, drawing inspiration from their religious teachings, of getting involved in campaigning and political activity to bring about societal change in line with their beliefs. For example: William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect, a group of Christian evangelicals, were key in the abolition of the slave trade; and the Salvation Army's primary mission was evangelical but they

identified key issues affecting the population in London's East End and undertook activities beyond spiritual outreach to address those issues, such as homelessness, alcoholism and poverty, which laid the foundation for many of today's social services and reforms, reflecting their belief that faith can be action-based and deeply rooted in service to others. Today organisations such as Islamic Relief continue that legacy as they actively campaign on international issues such as gender based violence.

- [Slide 9] The Commission recently commissioned some Trustee research and research from members of the public. That research showed that today both the public and Trustees agree that charities should be able to campaign for social change.
- [Slide 10] But when and how can charities campaign? A charity must have a charitable purpose and must be for the public benefit. An organisation with a political purpose, does not have a charitable purpose because political purposes, in law, are not charitable. An organisation with a political purpose might have been created to found a political party or to influence laws and public policy. However, campaigning and political activities can be used to support and further a charitable purpose. Campaigning and political activities are permissible for charities, so long as they are towards its charitable purpose.
- [Slide 11] There is a risk in campaigning and political activities by charities if they do not align with the charitable purpose. Campaigning undertaken by charities must align with their charitable purposes and further them. Charities can take risks. While risk can be an every day part of a charity's activity, what is essential is that Trustees identify those risks, manage them effectively and are thoughtful and considerate of the risks being taken. Trustees need to be risk aware rather than risk averse.
- There can be a number of risks associated with campaigning. Two key risks:
 - a) [Slide 12] At the core of all charities lies the principle of independence. Trustees tasked with the critical duties of decision-making, shaping the direction and ethos of charities, need to uphold that independence. The public holds charities in high esteem, largely due to their perceived independence. To uphold that trust, charities must maintain independence when interacting with political parties or their representatives. Legally, it is essential that charities maintain that independence, especially within the political arena. Charities cannot endorse or provide financial backing to any political party, candidate or politician. It is permissible for a charity to back policies that align with its charitable objects, but that support must never compromise its independence, either in reality or in perception. When interacting with political entities, charities need to be transparent and considerate of the ramifications, so as to safeguard both their charity's reputation and the public's trust, not just in their individual charity but also in the wider charity sector.
 - b) [Slide 13] Charities can use emotive or controversial material in their campaigns but Trustees must always consider their responsibilities to protect the charity and its beneficiaries, and the balance of their campaign. Any material used should be grounded in factual accuracy and supported by evidence. The emotive content must be in line with the objectives of the campaign and, as noted earlier, the campaign must further the charity's purposes. The content must not violate any legal standard, such as advertising standards. The legal duty of Trustees to manage resources responsibly includes reputations. Trustees must be mindful of that when campaigning. Charities might use such material if there are potential benefits (such as fostering deeper understanding of the issue, potentially leading to increased donations or influencing behavioural shifts or prompting a change in

policy stances). It is crucial that campaigns remain accurate and evidence based. Trustees must always weigh the risks of using emotive content against its potential benefits.

- [Slide 14] The Commission's guidance sets out an essential framework when considering any campaign for a charity. Firstly, what are the key objectives of the campaign and how do they align with the broader purpose of the charity? It is imperative to ensure that every campaign reflects the fundamental objects of the charity. The crucial question to ask is 'Do any of the objectives of the campaign fall outside of the charity's goals?'
- [Slide 15] It is also important to consider if any of the activities have political implications, such as whether the charity might be perceived as supporting a particular political party, and how to mitigate that. Trustees also need to consider the anticipated financial costs of the campaign and potential risks, such as the potential risk of the campaign not succeeding, risks to a charity's reputation, potential threats to the Trustees' independence or any unintended consequences that may arise.
- In conclusion, every campaign requires planning and understanding of the charity's objectives and a commitment to the charity's independence. Additional sensitivities might apply around the time of elections, so campaigns and political activity at those times will need careful consideration. The Commission provides [additional guidance](#) on that.
- [Slide 16] The Commission has also recently launched [guidance on charities and social media](#). A lot of campaigning these days is supported by social media. The whole charity sector was involved in the guidance and responses were taken into consideration. There has been good feedback on it so far.
- The Commission has also produced [guidance for Trustees on decision-making](#) which sets out a decision-making framework. The Commission cannot make decisions on behalf of charities. It is the Trustees' responsibility to do that. If they do so within that decision-making framework, making reasonable decisions that a reasonable Trustee board might make, they should be ok. It is important to record the decision-making process, so that if the campaigning or activities are called into question there is an audit trail of the decisions made and the basis on which they were made.

30. Rabbi Wollenberg thanked Ms Bennett and invited any questions or comments.

31. In discussion the following questions were raised. Responses from Ms Bennett are in italics.

- How is it best to contact the Faith Engagement Team?
Via email at faithoutreach@charitycommission.gov.uk.
- If a local MP or Councillor has been invited to a faith event because they are a friend of the community, and an Election is suddenly called, do other candidates need to be invited?
It is likely that it would be fine if they were the sitting MP, but Ms Bennett would check on this. [Note: her subsequent response is at Annex C]
- Sometimes candidates came to places of worship to discuss their policies. Was it ok to allow them to do so?
In order to show impartiality, if hustings were being held then all candidates needed to be invited in order to express their views to the community. If a candidate approached a place of worship directly, and was accepted, then it would be most appropriate to offer that same opportunity to all parties. Not doing so, might open the charity to risk.

- What would the risk to the charity be? Would its status be withdrawn? Would it be fined?

There was no time to respond to this question.

32. Rabbi Wollenberg thanked Ms Bennett again for her presentation.

Ms Bennett left the meeting.

Agenda Item 9: Update on hate crime issues and on ‘Martyn’s Law’

33. Rabbi Wollenberg drew attention to the information in the Background Note about hate crime issues and on ‘Martyn’s Law’.

Hate crime

34. Rabbi Wollenberg noted that hate crime statistics often did not reflect the true figures due to under reporting.

35. Dr Crabtree drew attention to the formal launch of SikhGuard. It had been in operation informally previously but the National Police Chiefs’ Council had given it a formal launch in August in Nottinghamshire

Martyn’s Law

36. Dr Crabtree said that she had been in conversation with the Home Office about Martyn’s Law. The FCF had had extensive and significant discussion about it last year. Faith communities had expressed concern that it would be almost impossible to manage security arrangements. The Home Office had looked into that. There had been a lowering of the initial demands that had been suggested. As was noted in the Background Note, the Home Office had said that it was likely that most places of worship would fall within the ‘Standard Tier’ with lower requirements, whilst continuing to take safety seriously. It was proposed that whether a place of worship charged an entrance fee would be used as a benchmark for allocating places of worship to different Tiers, though that was not yet final. She was planning to speak again with the Home Office in the coming week. If FCF members had any questions or concerns about any of the new developments, it would be helpful if they could raise those. They could also raise them directly with the Home Office.

37. In discussion two questions were raised. Responses from the Executive Director are in italics.

- How much were faith communities aware of the provisions?

The matter had been extensively discussed and faith communities had had a number of opportunities to join briefings by the Home Office. The Executive Director had been invited to assist on a roundtable in March at Westminster Abbey arranged by the National Counter Terrorism Security Office, which had been an opportunity to discuss many of the issues in depth. There had been developments since that time. The FCF was already aware of the planned legislation through previous briefings, through material in Circulars and in the Newsletter.

- What was the timetable for implementation?

The Home Office had not yet given a fixed timetable. The Parliamentary website provided updates on the progress of Bills through Parliament. A lot would, of

course, depend on what went through Parliament and when a General Election was called.

Agenda Item 10: Other issues of current interest and concern

38. Rabbi Wollenberg 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. None had done so.

Close of meeting

39. Rabbi Wollenberg thanked everyone for attending for their contributions. He also thanked the Executive Director for her work on the funding position and her work on the possible statement noted earlier in the meeting, which had been challenging.
40. The date for the next FCF meeting would be circulated in due course. It was likely to be in early December.

5 December 2023