

## THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK

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

from 1.30pm to 3.00pm on Monday 19 June 2023

via Zoom

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

**Present:** Imam Qari Muhammad Asim MBE (Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board); Ms Jo Backus (Network of Buddhist Organisations (UK)); Judith Baker (Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations); Dr Desmond Biddulph CBE (Buddhist Society and FCF Moderator); Mr Mohinder Singh Chana (Network of Sikh Organisations (UK)); Mr Peter Colwell (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland); 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 and FCF Moderator); Mr Rajnish Kashyap (Hindu Council (UK)); Ms Sabira Lakha (World Ahlul-Bayt Islamic League); Mrs Edit McCathie (Baha'i Community of the UK); Ms Smita Oza (BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha); Mr Neil Pitchford (Druid Network and FCF Moderator), Mr Satnam Singh Poonian (Network of Sikh Organisations (UK) and FCF Moderator); Mr Vinay Shah (Institute of Jainology and FCF Moderator); Mr Simon Bland (General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches); Mr Elliot Vanstone (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales); and the Revd Sarah Bingham (Inter Faith Working Group of the Baptist Union of Great Britain).

**Apologies:** Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Inter Faith Council for Wales; Methodist Church in Britain; Sir Lankan Sangha Sabha of GB; United Reformed Church in the UK; and Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe.

**Moderator apologies:** Ms Tracey Prior; and Dr Riaz Sanatian.

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

#### 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.
2. Apologies were noted.
3. A period of silence was observed, keeping in mind all those working for inter faith understanding and cooperation.
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 15]

## **MAIN SESSION**

### **Agenda Item 6: Discussion of some current issues including publication of Colin Bloom report and faith engagement with legislation on migration**

#### a) Report on Independent Faith Engagement Review

16. Rabbi Mordechai Wollenberg, taking the chair, drew attention to the information in the Background Note to the Agenda and invited any reflections on the report and its recommendations.
17. In discussion the following points were made:
  - The Bloom review had been extensive and there had been good coverage of areas such as faith literacy in Government, education, prisons and the Armed Forces. However, many in the Hindu community were concerned about Chapter 6 which was about 'Nationalism'. It was difficult to know what it meant by 'nationalism'. Did it mean that you were proud to be from your spiritual homeland of India, for instance gathering at the Indian High Commission to celebrate Independence Day? Every country had that kind of pride. Did that impact Hindus relationships with the UK? Of course not. Did it mean they were extremists? Of course not. The speaker had tried to engage with Mr Bloom about this but he was away at the moment. There were fleeting references in the report to the incidents in Leicester in 2022. These were very unfortunate incidents and should not have happened. However, blaming one community because of reports on the BBC and

Channel 4 was not appropriate. Some of the reports had been discredited. A lot of misinformation had been fed through the media. The Hindu community should not be castigated for what happened. It had been peacefully engaged since arriving in the UK. To say that people had become nationalists or extremists because they loved their homeland was very wrong. In response to a question, he said that attempts had also been made to speak with DLUHC. Dr Crabtree noted that the review undertaken by Mr Bloom had been described as an independent one, so engagement with the Department would presumably need to be on the footing that it would be responding to the review in due course.

- The Board of Deputies had looked at the report in detail and analysed all the issues that affected the Jewish community. It had set up a meeting with officials from DLUHC. The report raised some important issues that had not been addressed for a number of years, so, whether or not the recommendations were adopted by Government, it was a helpful roadmap for issues that the Board of Deputies wished to raise with Government.
- Recommendations 4 and 6 about improving Government liaison seemed helpful. However, Recommendation 16 seemed to isolate the Sikh community as needing a particular focus as opposed to any other faith group or social group where extremism might develop. That isolation seemed to the speaker [from one of the Christian denominations] to be 'grossly unfair'. It was surprising to see Recommendation 20, relating to ensuring that people were not being married by force, given that Ministers were already required to ensure that people coming to be married were not there by force and to ask a question during the ceremony about consent. The speaker was concerned that the recommendation seemed to suggest that it might become a criminal offence with the Minister held culpable, even if they had been misled by those coming to get married.
- The report was very thorough. However, in relation to the way in which Hindus were portrayed, the report did not explore any of the ways in which it was a positive, peaceful community. Some of the material on which the report sought to rely had been discredited.
- Part of the report dwelt on subversive activities within the Sikh community. This was very unfair because only a very small minority of Sikhs were involved. With regard to the Khalistani movement, one had to go back to the 1980s when an attack had been launched on the Golden Temple by the Indian Government and many people had been killed. Later on, genocidal killing of Sikhs had been carried out with anyone who looked like a Sikh being a legitimate target. One had to understand the background to this concern. It was unfortunate that the report dwelt a lot on it. Anyone interested in further detail could read the response of the Network of Sikh Organisations (UK). (<https://nsouk.co.uk/summary-of-the-bloom-reports-section-on-sikhs/>)
- It was also concerning that the report referred to the activities of some individuals and Sikh organisations as fuelling sectarian and anti-Muslim sentiments, as well as legitimising discriminatory and misogynistic behaviour. The report ignored the fact that anti-Muslim sentiments were generally a reaction to the behaviour of Muslim grooming gangs towards Sikh girls and other non-Muslim girls. Misogyny existed in all communities; less so among Sikhs because of Sikh teachings on gender equality, which were followed by the majority.
- The speaker said that they agreed with the majority of other speakers that sometimes certain things had been taken out of context in the Bloom Review report. Extremism in the Sikh community had been given about 11 pages in the report. Yet the Sikh community was not that significant in that regard compared to other minority communities. It was very sad that where, for instance, a Sikh

wanted to establish a homeland, Khalistan, they were called 'extremist' or 'terrorist' but some others would be seen as 'nationalist'. The FCF representative was not aware of any Sikhs in British jails who had been convicted of terrorism or extremism, nor of any awaiting trial in the UK. There seemed to be a hidden agenda. It was concerning that some minor incidents had been increased out of proportion; people reading the report would form an opinion of the Sikh community that was not good for race relations or inter faith dialogue. The Sikh community was very peace-loving and took pride in Guru Nanak's philosophy that everyone was part of one family.

- The report had some positive aspects and some misplaced focus. For example, singling out the Sikh community seemed to be unfair and uncalled for. The Muslim Council of Britain had shared its response to the report on its website. <https://mcb.org.uk/bloom-review-points-to-the-contribution-of-faith-communities-in-britain/> During the pandemic an elephant in the room was the way Government engaged with faith communities. If anything was to be learned from that, there needed to be serious thinking about how Government engaged with faith communities in future crises.
  - One recommendation missing from the report was proper Government funding for inter faith dialogue, for people to come together and understand one another, helping to understand root causes, rather than just addressing the symptoms.
18. Rabbi Wollenberg said that, listening to the reflections, it was clear how sensitive any religious 'conflict' was and how difficult it was to ever comment or report on it because there were so many sensitivities involved.
19. Dr Crabtree said that, picking up on the last point made in the discussion, the report was principally framed in terms of the Government engaging directly with faith communities. There was little discussion about how inter faith or multi faith structures such as IFN might be engaged with as part of civil society (rather, the recommendations seemed to point towards Government expanding its own internal resources with a view to carrying out activities potentially including some of those of such organisations) or about faith communities engaging together (alongside bilateral engagement). During the pandemic, in England the Government had established a 'taskforce' with selected faith leaders and then held individual faith roundtables. In Scotland and Wales the governments had engaged with the national inter faith linking structures there and also engaged with the faith communities on a multi faith basis from the start. The recommendations might perhaps point to towards the Government continuing, in England, with its existing approach. As a more general point, there were questions for Government about patterns of engagement. With whom did they view it as appropriate to engage, and how? It would be important for Government to have multi faith engagement as well as single faith engagement. Both had their place. In contexts where the Government operated with restrictions on the faith community bodies with which it engaged, there was a likelihood that Government might choose not to engage in frameworks such as the IFN FCF but rather to create its own.
20. It was not clear when a response to the Review report would emerge; a number of other recent reviews were also under consideration. It was important to feed comments back to DLUHC as a number of bodies were doing and also to have a chance for multi faith and inter faith discussion.

21. Rabbi Wollenberg asked whether it would be helpful for people to make reference to the Bloom report when writing letters to Ministers about IFN's funding. Dr Crabtree said that a number of those who had written had done so, noting the importance of religious literacy and faith engagement. However, as noted earlier, it was an independent report, rather than a Government one.

b) Faith engagement with legislation on migration

22. Rabbi Wollenberg drew attention to the information in the Background Note to the Agenda.

23. No reflections were offered.

### **Agenda Item 7: Other issues of current interest and concern**

24. 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. One had done so. Information about this had been provided in the Background Note to the Agenda. It related to an event that was due to have been held in London on 15 June entitled 'National Sikh Consultation, calling Sikhs to Jesus'. The emails received from the Sikh FCF Moderator, Mr Satnam Singh Poonian, about this had been provided in an annex. As noted in the Background Note, relevant to the issue were two IFN documents – 'Mission, Dialogue and Inter Religious Encounter' and 'Building Good Relations with People of Different Faiths and Beliefs' (the Code).

25. Dr Crabtree said that the 'Code' had been developed with the membership, with the assistance of a multi faith working group, and taken forward in such a way that it was binding on all member bodies and was so on all organisations that became members subsequently. 'Mission, Dialogue and Inter Religious Encounter' (MDIRE) (the long document to which it was linked) was a much more comprehensive document. It was not binding in the same way. It had been widely used, and was still used sometimes, including in global contexts. MDIRE reflected what the faith communities linked by IFN in the 1990s thought could be said about the key issues, including about manipulative or difficult forms of trying to persuade others of one's own beliefs. Mr Poonian had drawn attention to a particular event but also drawn attention to more general issues.

26. Mr Satnam Singh Poonian said that, following discussion with local councillors and correspondence from Lord Singh of Wimbledon, the event that had been due to have been held on 15 June had been cancelled. It had been trying to undermine a well-established religion that promoted equality, fairness and justice for all. The Sikh Gurus had sacrificed themselves and their children to defend the right to worship and believe. Sikh terminology, such as 'guru', 'shiromani' and 'langar' had been hijacked – the material referred to Jesus as being the 'ultimate guru' and one of the bodies in the Punjab had now called itself the Shiromani Church Parbandhak Committee, after the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. In some places, including in the Punjab, people had been recruited to wear turbans in order to make it easier to convince turban-wearing Sikhs that they were following another guru. The Christian Gospel was being sneaked in to unsuspecting Sikhs who were not very educated, who were even vulnerable in certain cases. Sometimes money was being offered. There were cases of this in the Golden Temple precinct. This type of

behaviour was counterproductive to inter faith dialogue and to world peace more generally. It was not just about Sikhs. In the past the organisation in question had targeted other faith communities. There was a verse in the Sikh holy book which some misconstrued to mean that God had given a son. That understanding of the term 'bana' was not correct and people needed to stay within limits.

27. A question was asked about whether the event had been cancelled because of a change of heart or because of external pressure. Mr Poonian said that it was cancelled because of pressures.

28. Rabbi Wollenberg said that it was good that there had been effective engagement in order to prevent the event taking place. Mr Poonian said that was true but this should not have to be resolved on an event by event basis. There needed to be understanding and respect. 'Inter faith' had been started by Guru Nanak who had said that everyone was part of one human family. When work had been started on the building of the Golden Temple, Guru Arjan had invited a Muslim saint to lay the foundation stone. Sikhs believed in working together. That was why there was so much respect from different faith communities for the Golden Temple.

29. Rabbi Wollenberg (Jewish Moderator as well as Co-Moderator in the chair) observed that had the word 'Sikhs' been replaced with 'Jews', the Jewish community would have responded strongly. Stepping back from specifics, the bigger issue was that proselytising to other faith communities in such a way, whatever the parameters, was clearly unhelpful to inter faith coexistence. This was covered in the two IFN documents referenced earlier.

30. In discussion the following points were made. Responses from Mr Poonian are in italics.

- This was an example of why IFN was so valuable. Without the matter being raised through IFN, the FCF member would not have known about it. The material was shocking but not surprising. The organisations involved were not mainstream Christian organisations. Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) had done quite a lot of work around the ethics of how one shared one's faith in the public square. There were particular faiths, like Christianity and Islam, which were evangelistic and wished to share and grow their faith. The Christian Muslim Forum had done some work some years ago on the ethical guidelines around the issue, so that people were not put under undue pressure and subjected to manipulative tactics. CTBI had also done some work about church growth raising ethical questions with Churches around this. The FCF member extended his solidarity to Mr Poonian and Mr Mohinder Singh Chana and all the Sikh community on behalf of CTBI. Some churches had opposed people like Franklin Graham coming to their community because of his views, such as homophobia. Had there been any support from other churches in local area?

*The event was due to have been held in Ilford. He did not live nearby. He had not spoken to any churches in the area. Gurdwaras took pride in helping others. They always offered langar to those in need, particularly during the pandemic and also now, with the cost of living crisis. Some people who received meals, offered to do something in return, such as cleaning because they were grateful for the support. That built a closeness with people of other faiths. But now there was some concern about people's motives for coming to gurdwaras. That was very upsetting. It was not what Guru Nanak intended. There needed to be some guidelines and a statement made that this should not be allowed.*

- The FCF representative used to live near Ilford. The local authority had been led by a political leader who was Sikh. There had been a good relationship between people from different faiths. The Malachai homeless project had been put together by the Salvation Army with the support of other faiths in the community. Communities worked best when they worked together with others on local issues.
- To try to indoctrinate others when they already had a faith of their own was very unhelpful.
- There were excellent inter faith relations in Redbridge and the local area, so this was a shot across the bow.
- The FCF representative [from one of the Christian denominations] had previously worked with Scripture Union and done a lot of work with British Asian congregations in London, including in Ilford with the Tamil church. Two of the three of the speakers on the event poster were British Asian Christians. Looking at the projects they were working with, they appeared to see their 'mission field' as other Asians living in Britain, whether British born or from other nations. The Lausanne Movement did not have a structure; it was a movement not an organisation. Within their Mission Conferences they had working groups focusing on different areas of mission. It appeared that some global Asian Christians had seen that there was not a working group on bringing the Gospel to Sikhs and this event was a response to that. Christians were a mission faith and had an instruction to share good news. In this case it was not being done very wisely. It would be of concern if a blanket statement was issued saying that missionary faiths needed to drop that element of their faith. However, this particular focus and the way it was being presented was very unhelpful. It was unlikely that Ram Gidoomal or Kuldip Rajo (the speakers mentioned on the poster for the event) would have been seeking to be deliberately offensive. They were caught up in their passion for sharing good news. The High Road Baptist Church in Ilford might have been chosen because of its location rather than any particular denominational connection.
- An FCF representative from the Sikh community expressed gratitude for the support offered by CTBI. The event had come as a shock. Sikh attitudes to Christians were benevolent and they generally got on very well. The Lausanne Movement appeared to have held its first meeting in Edmonton Canada in 2019 and, according to one of the resolutions at that meeting, there had been a particular focus on the Sikh community.
- An FCF representative [from one of the Christian denominations] said that the Lausanne Movement had held its first conference in 1971. It usually held a conference once a decade for people working in evangelisation and mission. It had working groups in many different contexts. This was not a new approach for the Lausanne Movement. The Lausanne Movement had working groups for many different faiths, such as Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims. Working to try and reach the Sikh community with the Gospel had started at grassroots level in 2019 because people from China, the Philippines and other nations attending the Edmonton event had identified a gap. This was not a position taken by all Christians. Perhaps the fact that it had taken over 40 years to set up a working group to share the Gospel with Sikhs showed particular respect for the Sikh community.

31. Rabbi Wollenberg said that national faith bodies usually approached issues very carefully and it was very frustrating when someone came in from outside with the best of intentions and upset the apple cart. As had been noted earlier, the organisation behind the event was not a mainstream one. The event had received a

lot of publicity. All the local faith groups in the area had disassociated themselves from it.

32. Dr Crabtree said that IFN documents created in response to the Decade of Evangelism / Evangelisation<sup>1</sup> by the multi faith working group did not say that mission was unacceptable. What it talked about was the parameters of how one shared one's view, whether in terms of mission or different forms of sharing, avoiding exploitation, vulnerability and so forth. It was not about 'either/or'. It was about the ethos of respect, treating each other well and not being exploitative. There would be a wide range of views on the matter. IFN did not often highlight what was in Mission, Dialogue and Religious Encounter, which tended to be used by people in theological contexts. It might be a good idea to highlight it again, and also the 'Building Good Relations' code. Both were still very much to the point.
33. Mr Poonian said that there was a difference between sharing the good news and calling Sikhs to Jesus. One person's good news could be another person's bad news. Sikhs thought they were very fortunate to have been born Sikhs. That was why they did not cut their hair; they loved nature and wanted to stay as God intended. People had no right to tell anyone else that they were less fortunate. Sikhs would always welcome people of different faiths without asking them to convert. They also got on well with people of no faith. Faith was a personal matter. Further, there was a difference between evangelism and targeting a whole community. The matter could not be brushed away as just one movement. It would be helpful if IFN could say that this was not acceptable. IFN's Code refers to 'working to prevent disagreement from leading to conflict', 'not misinterpreting or disparaging other people's belief and practises' and 'avoiding imposing ourselves and our views on individuals and communities'. But then people were openly advertising such events. This was not acceptable and that should be said. He was grateful to everyone for their kind words and hoped everyone could stay respectful and work together to make the world peaceful.
34. Rabbi Wollenberg said that, as the Executive Director had noted, there were existing documents that could be given more prominence and perhaps circulated again.

***Action: IFN to highlight the relevant aspects of Mission, Dialogue and Inter Religious Encounter.***

#### **Agenda Item 8: Inter faith engagement of faith communities**

35. Given the short time available, Rabbi Wollenberg invited members to share any news of recent or forthcoming inter faith engagement with the IFN office by email.

#### **Close of meeting**

36. Rabbi Wollenberg thanked everyone for attending for their contributions. The date for the next FCF meeting would be circulated in due course.

8 September 2023

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<sup>1</sup> Explained in the Annotated Agenda. Decades announced by the Anglican and Catholic Churches, respectively, which has led to the work on Mission, Dialogue and Inter Religious Encounter.