

THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK

MINUTES OF VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE FAITH COMMUNITIES FORUM

from 2pm to 4pm on Wednesday 6 December 2023

via Zoom

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

Present: Minister Julia Almond (Spiritualists' National Union and FCF Moderator); Mr Pravin Amin (Hindu Forum of Britain); Imam Qari Asim MBE (Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board); Judith Baker (Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations); Ervad Yazad Bhadha (Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe); the Revd Sarah Bingham (Inter Faith Working Group of the Baptist Union of GB); Mr Mohinder Singh Chana (Network of Sikh Organisations (UK)); the Revd Dr 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 Prudence Jones (Pagan Federation); Mr Rajnish Kashyap (Hindu Council (UK)); Miss Sabira Lakha (World Ahlul-Bayt Islamic League and FCF Moderator); Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra (Muslim Council of Britain); Mr Darayus S Motivala (World Zoroastrian Organisation); Mr Dapo Ogunrinde (Council of African and Afro-Caribbean Churches (UK)); Ms Smita Oza (BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha); Mr Satnam Singh Poonian (Network of Sikh Organisations (UK) and FCF Moderator); the Most Venerable Bogoda Seelawimala (Sri Lankan Sangha Sabha of GB); Mr Vinay Shah (Institute of Jainology); Dr Susan Sigel (Interfaith Scotland); The Revd Dr Kevin Snyman (United Reformed Church in the UK); and Mr Elliot Vanstone (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales).

Apologies: Baha'i Community of the UK; Board of Deputies of British Jews; the Druid Network; the Network of Buddhist Organisations (UK); and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (UK).

Moderator apologies: Ms Trupti Patel; Mr Neil Pitchford; and Dr Riaz Sanatian.

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

Professor Gurch Randhawa (University of Bedfordshire) [for Agenda Item 4]; and Ms Deborah Weston (NATRE and REC) [for Agenda Item 6].

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. 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 requested 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.

MAIN SESSION

Agenda Item 3: Community relations in the UK and responding together to hate crime in context of recent Israel / Hamas / Gaza impacts

6. Canon Barber drew attention to the information in the Background Note and said that he hoped everyone had had a chance to look through it.
7. In discussion the following points were made:
 - An FCF member offered two reflections from the experience of their role in the Jewish community. These had emerged from recent local inter faith meetings and meetings with political leaders and police. They could only speak for their own area of Redbridge, but it was acknowledged by the Muslim community that the Islamophobia was not coming from the Jewish community; it was coming from the Far Right. That was where the fears lay. Secondly, the situation on the ground was, thankfully, quiet and people were relatively safe. Unfortunately, however, that was not what people saw in the media and what was being spread on social media. It only took one comment from someone, for example, in Iran to trigger waves of fear. That had been seen a month or so previously with school closures. A man wearing a kippah had posted a video saying that he had been harassed (the FCF member thought the person had been at a recent Pro-Palestinian rally) and that it was time to leave the UK. The figure was quite a well known and outspoken activist. The FCF member had not shared the video because they did not agree that it was time to leave the UK. People's fears were not playing out

because in reality relations were good and there had not been any local incidents of which they were personally aware. But even so, there was a huge fear and anxiety and in today's social media age that was a big, big challenge.

- An FCF member from the Muslim community said that it was good that in the UK there was reasonable peace given the irresponsibility exhibited on social media. Reflecting on the previous speaker's point about fear, there was also fear felt by the Muslim community. The Muslim community in the UK felt pressured, including by Government, to issue statements on matters that were beyond their responsibility. There was also concern about vocabulary used by mainstream media. For example, children were children, whether they were Israeli children or Palestinian children - not, for example, 'children' in one case and 'under 18s' in another. There was a similar concern about the word 'hostages' not also being applied to people detained without a fair trial. Language needed to reflect international law. Everyone was praying that this unfortunate conflict would come to a quick resolution. Nobody wanted to see the bloodbath on the screens. Human beings were human beings, irrespective of faith and creed and nationality, and humanity had to be respected and had to be dignified across the board.
- A different FCF member from the Muslim community said that it was very reassuring to hear that the British Jewish community was not demonstrating any Islamophobia. They hoped that British Muslims were not displaying antisemitism. They had seen some reports of that happening and that was unacceptable and was to be condemned. They went on to express concern for younger people in universities and colleges who might be fearful that their expressions of support for Palestine and for an end to the bombing, and for an end to occupation, could lead to them being labelled as antisemites. Avenues for discussion and scope for expressing alternative views and offering evidence for those was being increasingly reduced. That curtailed flourishing - in a university environment one wanted/needed to have discussions, to present arguments and to challenge and be prepared to be challenged and to change one's position if convinced by a counter argument. The FCF member worried that calling comments 'antisemitic' when they might not necessarily be so could inadvertently contribute to a dislike of those who termed them so. That being said, of course everyone should be careful in the language and the terminology and the tone that they used. In one instance, a chaplain at a UK university had gone to Israel and had been posting images with the military personnel there on social media¹. That had caused worry and fear amongst students at that particular university in terms of the chaplain's ministry on campus if he had still been in the UK. Also, a British Israeli soldier had recently been killed in the fighting and that was also creating fear among younger Muslim people in terms of possible actions of others from the Jewish community that they encountered. These were some of the issues behind the headlines, that could create a breakdown of relations within student populations. Faith communities should try their utmost to reassure students that they were safe, and to reassure Muslim people on the streets that they were all against Islamophobia, antisemitism and all other kinds of hatred.
- An FCF member said that the last two months had been some of the most heartbreaking in their professional life. The Churches stood very much in solidarity with their Jewish and Muslim friends in these very difficult times for community relations. Working with the Churches in this area, it had been very, very difficult to find the right words to frame statements and prayers, because almost every word, certainly every sentence, could be contested at every level, and the

¹ A reference to a Jewish chaplain to a number of Yorkshire universities who was called up as a reservist to serve in the IDF.

interpretation placed on words that might be used with the very best intentions could be heard to imply all sorts of things. Churches Together in Britain and Ireland had produced a short resource to help to open up some discussion and reflection within its member Churches. Its title came out of the comment by the late Catholic theologian Donald Nicholl, that the place of the Christian was not to be neutral, but to be 'torn in two'. The resource was offered out of a Christian spiritual place and out of a concern for inter faith dialogue. It was available on the CTBI website. (<https://ctbi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Torn-In-Two-Responding-to-Conflict-in-Israel-Palestine.pdf.pagespeed.ce.2Lh5Juxrn5.pdf>)

- These were very difficult times and part of the issue for all people of faith was that this conflict seemed to have been politicised in the UK. There was almost a division saying 'If you're left wing, you'll be supporting Palestinians. If you're right wing, you'll be supporting Israel.' There did not seem to be a recognition that one might express sympathy and horror over what had been done by and to both sides and that actually it was not about politics, it was about recognising the shared humanity. Perhaps people of faith needed to be trying to change that narrative and to encourage recognition that people of faith in the UK were standing together in sympathy and love for one another. That was the model for the wider community to share, to stand in sympathy for all who mourned, and all who suffered and to stand in solidarity with all who were seeking peace.
- An FCF member from the Hindu community said that Hindus often considered themselves to be caught in the crossfire. They understood that there had been atrocities on both sides, but at the same time they worried about young children being the victims of war and had sympathy for them. It was, of course, to be hoped that in the UK the situation did not escalate, but that people were able to understand and work together to resolve this.
- An FCF member from the Sikh community said that there had recently been a meeting of the Global Sikh Council. It had been very difficult to say anything about what had happened in Israel on 7 October. It was horrific and what had happened since was also horrific. The Sikh community had considered where it stood and whether it had any power. It felt as though it did not have any power because politicians were now driving it. What had happened was not normal. It was horrific for both communities. Youngsters were being torn apart. The Sikh community was finding it very difficult apart from saying that everyone was part of one human community. This had nothing to do with religion itself. It was about the politics of the region, rather than faith communities.
- The Salvation Army was, as a Church, predominantly pacifist in the way that it related to others. The FCF member shared a personal view on war as an unadulterated sin and killing of another human being as abhorrent to the creator God and a failure to observe the command to love one another, including one's enemies. Everyone had seen the pictures of the abhorrent things that happened on 7 October and was also aware of the 5,000 children killed. It needed to stop and, however one prayed, there was a need to pray for peace, to pray that the peace of God, which was beyond understanding, would become a reality in the way people related to one another.
- Even those faith communities not directly involved in the conflict were feeling pulled to take one side or the other and to find out what the rights and wrongs were of the situation. Those communities not involved had the option of working at a more general level and praying, or invoking, for wisdom, understanding, reconciliation and a constructive solution to this. People of faith could do this without taking sides.

[Note, for reasons of timing, the agenda item needed to be drawn to a close in time for the invited speaker. The last three points were, therefore, offered in the course of the subsequent agenda item. They have been minuted here, however, to reflect their focus.]

8. Dr Crabtree said that Inter Faith Week – which had unexpectedly proved even bigger than the previous Week – seemed to have proved helpful in a number of ways during this very difficult period. A number of conversations were understood to have taken place quietly in the margins of meetings and activities that had taken place for it. IFN continued to seek to be helpful in a low key way.
9. Canon Barber invited the Executive Director to say a few words about the article about IFN that had been published in the *Sunday Telegraph* on 2/3 December. Dr Crabtree said that concerns from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) reported in the *Sunday Telegraph* were not described as an official perspective, and it had not been acknowledged or otherwise by DLUHC. DLUHC had been told about the IFN Policy on Making of Statements. That policy was consonant with both the advice of the Charity Commission relating to charities and campaigning, and also with IFN's Aims, Mission, Vision and Values. There was not much more that could be added. IFN had been carefully in touch with DLUHC about the statement matter previously, not just because of the *Sunday Telegraph* article. More generally, there was great pressure for people to say things which were supportive at the right time and in the right way. That had not always proven possible and an earlier comment about the difficulty of finding the right words was relevant. People had been expressing solidarity as best they could, sometimes almost in silence or through concentration on shared humanity.

Professor Gurch Randhawa joined the meeting.

Agenda Item 4: Faith communities and organ donation and transplant

10. Canon Barber said that FCF members had expressed a particular interest in returning to the topic of faith communities and organ donation. He welcomed Professor Gurch Randhawa, Professor of Diversity in Public Health, Director of the Institute for Health Research at the University of Bedfordshire and Director of the Institute's Organ Donation and Transplant Research Centre. Professor Randhawa would be talking about the importance of faith communities' engagement with organ donation and transplant, and about relevant recent research. There would then be time for questions.
11. Professor Gurch Randhawa thanked IFN for inviting him. A copy of his PowerPoint slides is at Annex A to these minutes. He offered the following points. Slide reference numbers are shown in brackets.
 - The title of my presentation is 'Equity in transplantation in the UK – the potential role of faith communities'. [1]
 - I take the clear view that faith communities have an enormous role to play. It is good to see at this meeting a few familiar faces of people who have been part of the journey thus far.
 - As a research unit, our work is about promoting informed decision making around organ donation; it is not about promoting organ donation *per se*. [2]
 - In the UK, there is an organ donor register and individuals can opt in or opt out. There is a conundrum, which is that people from minority communities are over-

represented on the opt out register - ie they have said that they do not wish to donate their organs - but are far more likely to be on the waiting list to receive an organ. [3] We need to think about why that is. Are we not preventing high blood pressure, diabetes, kidney disease, heart disease, etc in those communities? Also, why are people from minority communities far less likely to be on the opt in register? We need to understand that.

- I started this journey in 1994-95 when we did a study in Luton, where my university campus is based. It was a 'world first' study to look at organ donation from different ethnic and faith perspectives. [4] We did some modelling and found that if we did not do something about this there would be an 'over demand' for organs.
- Data was an issue. Because I had an idea of how the NHS worked, I knew we had to solve the data issue. [5] I joined the board of UK Transplant, the predecessor body to NHS Blood and Transplant. During that time I was able to encourage the collection of data on ethnicity, so that by 2005 the UK was routinely collecting data on ethnicity. [6] During those four years when I was on the Board of UK Transplant I did not do any research on transplantation, because that would have been a conflict of interest.
- In 2006 the UK Government set up an organ donation Taskforce. The very good news is that we achieved a 50% increase in organ donation over 5 years. [7] This was mainly done through solving some of the infrastructure issues in the NHS around hospitals and staff training and also through some public outreach and education. [8]
- It was a specific recommendation of the Taskforce that we needed to engage better with minority ethnic communities. As part of that work, we started to liaise with faith leaders. I was privileged to lead some of those conversations and that is where our faith consultation work began in 2007-2008. [9] This slide shows some quotes from faith leaders, some of whom will be well known to you. Lord Singh from the Network of Sikh Organisations said that you can be inspired by one talk, but you'll lose inspiration over time, and he was very wise. If you want organ donation to be on the radar of faith communities, congregations and faith leaders, there is a need to build momentum around this. Mufti Zubair Butt from the Muslim Council of Britain wisely said that we need to take advice from the communities rather than Government telling people what to do. [10]
- As some of you may know from personal experience, or from your congregations, waiting times vary greatly according to people's ethnicity and organ availability. For instance, for kidney transplants, Black patients wait much longer than Asian patients, who, in turn, wait much longer than White patients. [11] This is significant because the UK is incredibly diverse and it is becoming even more diverse. Indeed, by 2050, the UK is predicted to be the most diverse country in the world. [12]
- I am very fortunate in that I do research about the whole pathway. [13] I am just as interested in why people from minority communities are at greater risk of diabetes, blood pressure, kidney disease and so forth and how we can solve that. I have been working with Asian, African, Caribbean and, more recently, Eastern European communities. It is clear that the position is having an impact on dialysis capacities. Dialysis is the single biggest treatment cost to the NHS. There is also a human cost to dialysis. Being attached to a machine for 5-6 hours a day, 3-4 times a week is not a good quality of life. Sadly, we are seeing more and more people having to go overseas for transplant, sometimes taking part in the illegal activity of 'transplant tourism'. In minority communities, because of the lack of donors, not enough people are being transplanted and many of them therefore require end of life care.

- When families are asked about organ donation, there is a disparity of response based on ethnicity. Families from a white background say 'yes' to organ donation approximately 70% of the time. Non white families tend to say 'yes' approximately 40% of the time. [14] Interestingly, living donation is proportionate to ethnicity, so we seem to have less of a challenge with living donation. [15]
- Our research from interviewing different communities in the UK shows the concerns people have. [16-17] Sometimes they say "Now that you need my organs, you've found me. But where were you when I had high blood pressure, diabetes and kidney disease?". That is a very valid point. We need to consider how the healthcare system engages with different communities. I don't think they are hard to reach but, if we are blunt about it, they can be easy to ignore. Some people believe that doctors will allow them to die if they opt in to the donation register. Other people talk about not wanting to donate their eyes. Many people talk about religious leaders having a clear cut opinion. Others talk about the body and what it might look like in life after death. We have been including these issues in staff training. It is important that people are mindful of racism and religion and issues seen as important by members of communities.
- The significance of religion, ethnicity and culture has started to impact on government policy, which is good and there are a few reports that have started to recognise this. [18] But what we really need – which is one of the reasons I am so pleased to be here - is momentum and movement around public engagement and building trust. [19] We need to explain to people that they are genuinely going to have the best possible care to try to keep them alive and also reassure them about burial and cremation rituals and donation and transplant, and other issues about which they may have concerns. The best way of doing that is through trusted messengers, such as FCF members, and also those impacted by it, in other words living donors and donor families. [20]
- There has been very good faith in community leadership. In 2011 the NHS literature was rewritten and, importantly, this was done by faith leaders themselves, moving away from the more typical NHS generic text. [21] In 2013 we held a summit. [22] We then developed a Faith Action Plan although that unfortunately was not resourced as well as it could have been. [23] Again, there was very good input from faith communities. For example, Bishop Newcome started doing a blog. [24] We've also had good involvement from communities such as the Indian Catholic community [25], the Black Christian community [26], the Muslim community [27-28], the Catholic community [29] and the Jewish community [30]. We have also published books. [31] NHS Blood and Transplant is now investing in this through the Community Investment Scheme which was launched in 2018. [32] Some of you may be involved in these projects. They are spread across England, involving different ethnic and faith communities. [33] It has been wonderful to see some real traction and movement. For example, in 2019 a fatwa was issued on organ donation. [34]
- You may well ask whether all this work makes a difference. The good news is that it does. More and more people from minority communities are joining the opt in register and consent rates have been gradually going up, while the waiting list has gradually been going down. [35] An All Party Parliamentary Group on Organ Donation was set up in March this year. [36]
- Despite what politicians might say, or what we might hear in the media, history tells us that migration is part of human nature. Government modelling shows that, there are going to be big changes in the UK and across Europe. [37] I am currently doing work around different parts of Europe. Barcelona is experiencing phenomenal rates of increase in diversity and I have been involved in helping

them engage with their faith communities. [38-39] We are doing similar work in the Middle East, in India, in Qatar. [40-42] I was fortunate and privileged to be asked by the Al-Madhi Institute to work with them on a book on Islam and organ donation that we launched in Qatar earlier this year. [43-44]

- It would be very helpful now to open the floor to you. I would like us to think about what can faith communities do in terms of leadership and opening up the conversation about organ donation. We are part of a bigger movement. Other sectors such as the voluntary sector, schools, colleges, and businesses all have a role to play. [45] But faith leaders and communities could contribute so much. [46] I have set out four ways that they could help:
 - Offering leadership in showing people strategies to better look after themselves in terms of lowering their blood pressure, having a healthy diet and more active lifestyle
 - Encouraging more people to join the health and social care workforce and the NHS
 - Helping staff with culturally competent training
 - Helping us to engage the public better.
- I am happy to take questions. Thank you again for this opportunity.

12. Canon Barber thanked Professor Randhawa for his presentation and invited any questions or comments. In discussion the following points were made. Responses from Professor Randhawa are in italics.

- The presentation had been very interesting and it had been good to hear about the work being done by different communities on organ donation. The BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha had a dedicated team working extensively with its community on organ donation and would be happy to share any information it had to assist in this work.
- An FCF member offered a few points:
 - The language of 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic' communities was sometimes used on forms. The member did not always tick 'White' on forms, but rather ticked 'Other' and entered 'Ashkenazi Jewish'. People did not always show up in statistics.
 - The general change in attitudes to engaging religious communities and increase in understanding in the Jewish community of some of the ethical complexities had helped enormously with people in that community being prepared to sign up to the organ donor register. Previously they had felt, perhaps that their concerns were not understood. Now the system had changed and people could opt in and could also have a consultation with a rabbi about it.
 - The conversation was often around post-mortem donation, rather than living donation. Living donation was ethically far more straightforward in Jewish law and obviously could help a lot of people as well. That was a whole other area for faith communities to engage with.

As a country, the UK did quite well with living donations. Of course, that only tended to benefit those people who were waiting for a kidney or liver, so the challenge still remained for organs such as the heart, lung and pancreas. There was a need to increase visibility. In the countries that had got the highest donation rates in the world, like Spain, their media and society really gave visibility to deceased donors and donor family stories. They acknowledged them and recognised them. Whereas in this country, and many other countries, a lot more attention was given to people who were waiting for a transplant, which did not help normalise the act of donation.

- Was Professor Randhawa's international work in places such as Qatar and India specifically to help them or also to help solve the problem in the UK?
The work did help those countries but it also helped the UK. For example, it was known that many people in the Indian diaspora who lived in the UK, often looked to India when it came to such matters. His unit had, for example, been working with Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) in Amritsar which had been kind and supportive and had been championing organ donation.

- The Hindu Council (UK) (HCUK) had been actively involved in organ donation for the last two years and doing a lot of projects with temples. Often it was the people who needed organ donations, and their families, who came and engaged. It was still a battle to encourage people to become organ donors. It was not that they did not want to help. Perhaps the unforeseen fear factors played a significant role. Younger people often took the lead from older people, who did not want to talk about it. Perhaps it would be helpful to have more learning from Professor Randhawa because, like him, HCUK had connections with organ donation organisations in India as well. Those had visited the UK and HCUK had hosted them. It would also be good to know how to get younger people involved and to encourage living donation.

It was about normalising behaviour. People needed to see other people who looked like them and talked like them who had become donors. Those people did exist. For example, the Royal Family of Qatar hosted an event each year to acknowledge and recognise living kidney donors and deceased donors and donor families, and the media celebrated it. This meant that donors in Qatar knew that the Royal Family there would always celebrate them. Those people had names and faces and people knew they existed. In the UK the act of donation did not have the same visibility.

- Targeted campaigns and raising awareness had really helped, as had the fatwa that had been mentioned for the Muslim community. There was still a way to go. The work being done with countries in the Middle East sounded interesting. Were there any collaborations between the religious organisations or authorities in this country and those countries with which they were involved in the Middle East?
Collaborative work of that kind had begun, but it had been on hold for the last few months.
- The World Zoroastrian Organisation provided information to its members and allowed them to reach their own decisions. It would be happy to distribute information to its members about organ donation if Professor Randhawa would like to provide this.

Professor Randhawa's contact details would be made available to FCF members.

13. Dr Crabtree noted that she had been an observer on the original Government Task Force to which Professor Randhawa had referred and that IFN had continued to engage with these issues in subsequent years. IFN's office would be happy to be a point of contact and to have further conversation.

14. Canon Barber thanked Professor Randhawa again for his presentation.

Professor Randhawa left the meeting.

Agenda Item 5: Inter faith engagement of faith communities

15. Rabbi Mordechai Wollenberg, taking the chair, drew attention to the information on Inter Faith Week in the Background Note. It had been a very successful week. He

invited members to share news of any recent or forthcoming inter faith engagement, including joint work on social issues and any Inter Faith Week events.

16. In discussion the following points were made. Responses from the Executive Director are in italics.
- An FCF member said that they received requests for speakers to go into schools but they did not have enough people to meet the requests. It would be helpful to hear from other FCF members, after the meeting perhaps, if they had any structures in place to deal with such requests.
 - Quakers in Britain had been working with the Plum Village Buddhist community (followers of Thich Nhat Hanh) in a heartfelt desire to gather faiths and spiritual traditions to unite in a silent prayer walk and vigil for peace. All FCF members were welcome to join this. There would be an open meeting about it on the evening of 14 December to hear more about the proposal so far. The idea was for faith communities to co-create the project together. The walk was likely to be in London on 20 January. Anyone interested in becoming involved, could email judithb@quaker.org.uk.
 - Inter Faith Week had been excellent and IFN was to be congratulated. Representatives from the Salvation Army had attended a number of Inter Faith Week events around the London area. They had been very impressed at the graciousness of all faith groups in the way they listened to those who expressed different theological and faith understanding. This had been particularly true at events at two hospices - St Claire's in Hertfordshire and the Farley Hospice in Essex – where all faith groups had been given a very good opportunity to express how they cared for those in later life. The way this had been received had underlined similarities and what was held in common.
 - Pagans had been very active during Inter Faith Week. Just a few of the many examples of activity included: a Pagan from Avebury in Wiltshire laying a wreath at the Remembrance service at the Cenotaph; a Pagan helping organise a 'Meet a Muslim, Pagan, Buddhist, Jew, Humanist, Christian, etc' inter faith event in Devon and a peace candle lighting event; and a Pagan and a Humanist organising a multi faith woodland walk in Canterbury. It was very good to know that Pagans were reaching out at local level and cooperating with other faiths.
17. Dr Crabtree said one of the striking things about Inter Faith Week this year had been the high engagement of young people. More schools had taken part and there had been a number of creative activities, not just through RE but in whole school activities more generally, with, for example, many faith leaders being brought in to speak. A lot of universities had taken part. For example, at the University of Durham the Jewish Society had held a 'Friday Night Dinner' with inter faith guests and the Hindu Society had hosted a discussion on Dharmic concepts. A number of youth organisations had also taken part, such as the new National Multi Faith Youth Centre and the Religions for Peace Youth Interfaith Network. It was good to see that aspect of involvement developing alongside the broader engagement. Involvement in the Week in Wales had also increased. A new North Wales Interfaith Network had recently been formed.

Ms Deborah Weston joined the meeting.

Agenda Item 6: A National Content Standard for Religious Education in England

18. Rabbi Mordechai Wollenberg welcomed Mrs Deborah Weston, Executive Research Officer at the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education and Trustee of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales. She would be talking to the meeting about the importance of good multi faith RE and the proposed National Content Standard for England, which built on the principles set out in the Commission on RE (2018) and reflected changes that had impacted the education sector since that time. There would then be time for questions.
19. Mrs Deborah Weston thanked IFN for inviting her. A copy of her PowerPoint slides is at Annex B to these minutes. She offered the following points. Slide reference numbers are shown in brackets.
- In addition to the roles mentioned, I have also taught Religious Education (RE) for around 35 years in East London.
 - I would like to talk a little about some of the problems that RE has been facing and how you might be able to help.
 - As you may know, in 2018 the Religious Education Council in England and Wales (REC) set up an independent commission to look at the state of RE and to think about how it might be improved. [2] The Commission was comprised of people from the world of Higher Education, senior leaders, academics, faith community members and others. You may recognise a number of people in this photograph.
 - The Commission's report was entitled 'Religion and Worldviews: The way forward – A national plan for RE'. Since that time, the REC has been working on how it can encourage the Government to have a national plan to improve RE because the REC believes this is very much needed.
 - As part of this, the REC has undertaken a funded piece of work called the Religion and Worldviews Project. This is a two-year project (2022 to 2024). Professor Trevor Cooling is the project's director. The project has involved widespread consultation. About a year ago a draft resource was published which will eventually become a handbook for syllabus writers in all types of schools. Stephen Pett was the main author of this.
 - RE is statutorily required to be taught in all schools. It is not, however, part of the National Curriculum.
 - We often talk about 'high quality RE' but do not necessarily say exactly what is meant by that. I began to wonder whether it might be possible to use the draft handbook to form a National Content Standard (NCS) in the style of a National Curriculum document.
 - In July the REC agreed this NCS for RE. [3] It is important to say that it sits within the current legal framework and case law; it does not propose any changes to the law. The idea is to embed a standard into the planning and delivery of the subject. It draws on the Religion and Worldviews project and links to other work such as the Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) research review that has been published in the last 18 months or so. It is set out in the style of a National Curriculum document and outlines how it might apply in different types of schools, because the law has different requirements for different types of schools, namely schools with and without a religious character. It also includes appendices that set out the relevant parts of the law.
 - The main reason that an NCS for RE is needed is that there is currently no benchmark for it. [4] The quality of RE differs widely from school to school. The REC believes that Academy Trusts, SACREs and others would benefit from

working to a specific standard. It would be a non-statutory standard, but a standard widely agreed across the community. The hope is that it can enable celebration of some of the high quality RE that is found in some schools but also provide a means by which schools can be held to that are not giving pupils their entitlement.

- These charts provide some information on the position. [5] At present the Department for Education school workforce data shows that 22% of schools provide 0 hours for RE for Year 11; and 33% only provide between 0% and 3% provision, despite the fact that it is required by law and in the funding agreements of Academies.
- This slide shows an example of what one school claims is its RE provision. [7] As you can see, there is very little reference to religion at all. There is one reference in a Year 8 class to each of the six principal religions and that is all. And yet the school says it is providing RE. The problem is that it is very difficult for Ofsted to challenge it because funding agreements just say they must 'make provision for RE'. They are making provision; it's just not very good provision.
- In the last few weeks, His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Schools has published her final annual report. [8] This backs up the principle of a standard being needed because it says that there should be clear information for schools about the breadth and depth of the syllabus that they are expected to teach. She also said that RE is a complex subject and that lack of clarity and support from government makes schools' jobs harder.
- As I said, the NCS focuses on the draft handbook resource which has already been consulted on and gained widespread support across the RE community. [9] It is in the same format as a National Curriculum document but the main difference is that it does not specify or recommend a specific set of content. The phrase that I've tried to adopt is: "It's about the standard, not the stuff". That is because of the different requirements for different types of schools. It is incredibly difficult to get people to agree on what content should actually be covered, but perhaps not so difficult to think about what a standard might look like. It also recognises that progress can only be really measured once the content has been decided. That is, of course, the responsibility of individual schools.
- This next slide shows that the NCS fits with the National Curriculum format [10]. The structure will therefore be very familiar to senior leaders of schools. However, in this National Curriculum example for History, you can see that it includes the content required, such as Queen Victoria and The Tudors; but in the NCS we have instead set out six principles for selecting the content. [11] We are saying to teachers and syllabus writers, "These are the principles by which you can establish a high quality curriculum". The principles are:
 - it must be within the law;
 - you must be clear about what you are teaching and why;
 - it needs to be inclusive of both religious and non-religious worldviews;
 - it also needs to be inclusive of the diversity that exists between different religious traditions and within different religious traditions;
 - it should recognise that there are contextual factors, such as who you are teaching and where;
 - it should meet the 'collectively enough' principle used by Ofsted, ie you cannot teach about every different group within every different religion that exists in the world, so you should build the curriculum so that there is collectively enough material for pupils to have a good understanding of religions and beliefs; and
 - it all needs to be coherent and clearly visible for pupils and parents.

- The NCS includes a content exemplar. [12 and 13] This is provided as an example of a set of material that would meet the standard and be indicative of the ‘breadth’, ‘depth’ and ‘ambition’ of it. The content needs to be appropriate, and to focus on religious and non-religious worldviews, not on another curriculum subject, such as PSHE or Citizenship Education. There also needs to be adequate time to teach the subject, which is something that has very sadly declined over recent years. The exemplar uses Ofsted language.
- This table shows how the NCS would work in different types of schools, both schools with a religious character and schools that do not have a religious character. [14] As you can see, the legal framework is the first standard, then any governing or trust documents or statements for schools with religious character and then, finally, the NCS. As I said, schools will each be writing their own syllabus, deciding on the content, but it needs to be comparable in ‘breadth’, ‘depth’ and ‘ambition’ to the exemplar.
- The NCS is a very short document. It has been written for a wide range of constituents. [15] Some people have suggested that its title assumes it would include content, but it is just called the NCS because the alternative – a National Standard for the Content of Religious Education – seemed too long.
- There are a number of benefits that the NCS might offer to faith and belief communities. [16] It will help identify and support contributions to RE. So if people from different faith communities are going into schools, they can see what the standard is that is expected and what they are trying to support in the curriculum. That will then inform shared work and shared projects, of which there are of course many around the country, particularly with SACREs. It will provide greater clarity about what is meant by high quality RE and also provide a widely accepted definition of what is meant by RE – what it is and what it is not. It will encourage more sharing of good practice and continuity of provision between schools, both with and without a religious character, which will help children who move between different schools. It will also help SACREs and Academy Trusts to develop syllabuses.
- This slide shows the organisations that have already recommended the NCS so far. [17] These include the largest faith school providers: the Catholic Education Service, the Church of England and the Board of Deputies of British Jews. They also include others such as the Hindu Forum of Britain, Methodist Schools and the Network of Sikh Organisations. Oak National Academy, which produces resources for schools, has asked its suppliers to have due regard to the REC’s non-statutory guidance for RE.
- This slide summarises how the NCS can be used, which I have already covered. [18] It would be helpful to know from FCF members whether they think the NCS might improve the curriculum, what barriers there might be to its use and whether their organisations might consider recommending the NCS, if they are in a position to do so. [19]

20. Rabbi Wollenberg thanked Ms Weston for her presentation and invited any questions and comments. Those raised are below. Responses from Ms Weston are in italics.

- How did RE’s subject status relate to the NCS? Was the latter statutory?
RE was statutorily required to be taught in all state funded schools. The NCS was a non-statutory document. It was produced by the RE community for the RE community. If there was enough consensus and support for it – and good progress was being made towards that - then the Department for Education might badge it.
- In one FCF member’s experience as a former teacher, one of the barriers to implementation of non-statutory guidance, even where SACRE recommendations

were being followed, was that there was often no continuity when children changed schools. The FCF member had been an RE Coordinator in a Junior School that also had an Infant School. They had written an RE curriculum for both schools jointly in order to avoid duplication. The problem was also apparent when children began secondary school, as they had often come from several different primary schools which had all covered different RE topics, if any.

Continuity was an issue. The NCS was being recommended to multi Academy Trusts and several were considering it. The majority were now following Academy syllabuses, not agreed syllabuses. So it was very important for the Academy Trusts to be on board. The aim was that the NCS should be recommended and widely used in the same way as the non-statutory National Framework for RE had been used across the country (which had led to more consistency in terms of provision). Another of the difficulties was that there were different types of schools with different aims. If there was the same standard and the same principles behind the curriculum, then even if the content was slightly different, there was still the opportunity to build progression.

- If RE was statutory, then why were so many schools getting away with not teaching it?

Schools were getting away with it because they were not being held to account. Ofsted did not inspect individual subjects, just the curriculum in general. If Ofsted inspectors saw RE being taught that was not up to standard they would challenge it, but the position was inconsistent. The number of 'deep dives' into RE as a proportion of 'deep dives' across all inspections was very small. Because there was no agreed structure, such as the NCS, even if the Department for Education received complaints, it could not challenge the schools because, as noted earlier, they only had to 'make provision' for RE.

- There were also some schools where pupils were not being taught RE in Year 11 and so they were getting them to sit their RS GCSE in Year 10. Was that acceptable?

It was entirely unacceptable. Schools were required to provide RE for all pupils on the school roll. Year 11 pupils were still on the school roll. Commonly there would be a GCSE RS group and then core RE in addition, but, unfortunately, because of the lack of accountability, many schools had dropped that, so it was the GCSE RS or nothing. They were in breach of the law and of the relevant funding agreement.

- One of the charts shown in the presentation suggested that schools had only a single half term to try to cover the world religions. A lot of what was shared in the FCF was about how religion, or whatever names it was given, was experienced, rather than just learning facts. Was there space in the NCS for people to impart that kind of experience rather than just a knowledge base about religion?

The draft Handbook said that the syllabuses should include personal development and personal understanding. This was a bit like what used to be called 'learning from religion'. It was very important in the NCS. The Handbook set out in detail the importance of teachers using lived experience to make sure that children were learning from the experience of people from different groups within different religions. That was very important.

- The FCF member had been a SACRE representative when living in Wales and schools had been regularly challenged about their RE provision. Were there significant differences between the situation in England and in Wales and the other devolved nations?

Yes, there were significant differences. RE in Wales had recently changed quite radically and become Religion, Values and Ethics. It had a very different structure. The NCS was only being proposed for RE in England.

- It was a little disappointing that the NCS did not shed any light on the diversity of religions and the importance of teaching those religious beliefs and worldviews. At the moment, the Agreed Syllabus was formulated by local SACREs. Their approaches varied across the country and in some areas where there were more people from one religion than others, the other religions were almost forgotten. Pupils being taught across the UK should gain a knowledge of the diversity of religions, particularly those that existed in the UK. Some of the Agreed Syllabus did not even include some of the smaller religions.

Encouragement to include diversity ran all the way through the NCS. It was very important. The majority of secondary schools were not under the Agreed Syllabus anymore because they were Academies. Diversity was also at the heart of the draft Handbook resource, specifically the idea of including Dharmic traditions as well as Abrahamic traditions, or whichever term of classification was preferred. The draft Handbook resource could be shared with IFN after the meeting.

Note: During the discussion, for technical reasons, Canon Barber took the Chair at the request of Rabbi Wollenberg.

21. Canon Hilary Barber thanked Mrs Weston again for her presentation and everyone for their contributions. Mrs Weston said that she would be happy to continue the conversation with any FCF members after the meeting and for her email address to be passed on. Dr Crabtree said that IFN would be happy to connect people with Mrs Weston.

Ms Weston left the meeting.

Agenda Item 7: Other issues of current interest and concern

22. Canon Barber 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.

INTER FAITH NETWORK SESSION

[Paragraphs 23 to 33]

Close of meeting

34. Canon Barber thanked everyone for attending and for their contributions; and the staff for their work to prepare for the meeting.
35. The date for the next FCF meeting would be circulated in due course.

22 January 2024