

## THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK

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

from 11am to 1.15pm on Thursday 2 February 2023

at The Central Synagogue, 42 Hallam Street, London W1W 6NW and via Zoom

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

**Present:** Minister Julia Almond (Spiritualists' National Union)\*; Mr Pravin Amin (Hindu Forum of Britain); Imam Qari Muhammad Asim MBE (Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board)\*; Dr Desmond Biddulph CBE (Buddhist Society and FCF Moderator); Mr Peter Colwell (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland)\*; Ms Veronica Daniel (United Reformed Church in the UK); Ms Siriol Davies (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland/Churches Together in England); Ms Elizabeth Harris-Sawczenko (Board of Deputies of British Jews); 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); Mr Paras Meisheri (Jain Network); Mr Satnam Singh Poonian (Network of Sikh Organisations (UK) and FCF Moderator); Ms Tracey Prior (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and FCF Moderator); Lt Col Jonathan Roberts (Salvation Army); Dr Riaz Sanatian (Baha'i Community of the UK and FCF Moderator); Dr Shuja Shafi (Muslim Council of Britain); Mr Vinay Shah (Institute of Jainology and FCF Moderator); Ms Elizabeth Slade (General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches); Mr Elliot Vanstone (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales); and the Revd Andy Williams (Inter Faith Working Group of the Baptist Union of Great Britain).

**Apologies:** Druid Network, Methodist Church in Britain; Network of Buddhist Organisations (UK); Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations; Sir Lankan Sangha Sabha of GB; Vishwa Hindu Parishad (UK); and Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe.

**Moderator apologies:** Ms Trupti Patel; and Mr Neil Pitchford.

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

The Rt Revd James Newcome and Dr Anna Dixon and Mr Will Fremont-Brown (Archbishops' Care Commission)\* [for Agenda Item 5]

Ms Fazila Aswat (Together coalition) [for Agenda Item 7]

*\*Attended online.*

#### 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 beyond the FCF on the basis agreed by it in May 2017. The minutes follow FCF's agreed style:

namely, points made by individuals are noted in the minutes and have the status of views of the individual who is present on behalf of their member organisation; any points agreed by the meeting are clearly identified as such. Comments are unattributed except where from the Chair or where the Executive Director or another staff member has been asked to give input or to provide a point of information, or in particular contexts where the contributor has explicitly asked that their identity be noted. Within FCF meetings there is a chance for all bodies to contribute. Contributors carry responsibility for the accuracy of their contributions. Views expressed by contributors are not endorsed by IFN.

### **Agenda Item 1: Welcome and apologies**

1. The Revd Canon Hilary Barber, in the chair, welcomed those present and in particular his new fellow Co-Moderator, Rabbi Mordechai Wollenberg who was elected at the previous meeting and would be chairing with him for the first time. It was particularly good for the FCF to be meeting together again in person for the first time since the pandemic.
2. He expressed warm thanks on behalf of IFN to the Central Synagogue, which had most kindly provided the meeting space at a specially reduced rate, and also to Rabbi Wollenberg who had helped to arrange that.
3. Apologies were noted.
4. A period of silence was observed, keeping in mind all those working for inter faith understanding and cooperation, particularly at this time of World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW). The meeting sent its good wishes to WIHW.
5. Canon Barber explained, for the benefit of new members, that the FCF was a forum for member bodies of IFN in the category of national faith community representative body. It 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. Anyone wishing not to be included in photographs of the meeting should indicate. 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.

### **Agenda Item 2: Minutes of virtual FCF meeting on 19 October and Matters Arising**

[Paragraphs 6 to 7]

#### **MAIN SESSION**

### **Agenda Item 3: Brief roundtable introductions**

8. Those present introduced themselves.

*The Rt Revd James Newcome, Dr Anna Dixon and Mr Will Fremont-Brown joined the meeting via Zoom.*

## Agenda Item 4: Faith and social care

9. Rabbi Mordechai Wollenberg, taking the chair, welcomed the Rt Revd James Newcome, Bishop of Carlisle and Co-Chair of the Archbishops' Care Commission of the Church of England; Dr Anna Dixon, his fellow Co-Chair; and Mr Will Fremont-Brown from Lambeth Palace, the Archbishops' Commission Manager. Bishop Newcome would be talking about the Commission's recently published report 'Care and Support Reimagined: A National Care Covenant for England', which proposed actions to achieve a positive vision of care and support and the values which underpinned it. Further information was provided in the Background Note to the Agenda.
10. The Rt Revd James Newcome thanked IFN for inviting him to speak to the meeting. He offered the following reflections.

### *Background and process*

- A few years ago, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Revd and Rt Hon Justin Welby, wrote a book called 'Reimagining Britain'. Out of that, came three Church of England commissions: on housing, social care, and families. The brief for each Commission was to be radical and theological!
- Although Social Care Commission members come from variety of faith traditions, because it was set up by the Church of England, it has a Christian Theological basis. That has led to three fundamental beliefs which provided a framework for all its recommendations, which it felt would resonate with and be accepted by people of all faiths and none:
  - Every human being matters and is precious (because they are made in the image of God).
  - We are called to love our neighbours as ourselves (including the elderly and disabled).
  - We are interdependent and need each other.
- Out of those three beliefs came a series of universal values: flourishing; fairness; loving kindness; inclusivity; mutuality; and trust.
- The process of the Commission involved a combination of: theological discussion; listening to stakeholders and experts; visiting projects (especially in London and Cumbria); sharing of own personal experiences; and writing and refining the report.

### *Conclusions*

- The Commission reached three main conclusions.
  1. There is a need to re-think attitudes – to care, age and disability – in our society.

No radical change to the care system is possible without a cultural shift first. People who are elderly or disabled of any age should be seen not as a burden but as a blessing. The benefits of social care go in two directions.
  2. There needs to be a rebalancing of roles and responsibilities.

Care involves everyone. At different times we all offer care and support and we all need care and support. The Commission is recommending the setting up of a National Care Covenant, developed through a sustained programme of public dialogue and engagement. This would be an agreement by the various stakeholders (national and local government, communities, families and individuals) and would be overseen by national government. It would be

slightly different from the national care system that some people have been recommending, but like a care system would be a universal entitlement available to all. The key elements of such a Covenant would be: a real investment in local community; a stronger role for state: a new deal for unpaid carers (A Select Committee from the House of Lords has been looking at the role of unpaid carers and what their entitlement should be, and has just produced its report.); a commitment to our responsibilities as citizens; and enabling everybody to live life to the full. The Covenant would be a recognition of our mutual responsibilities, whatever part we play.

3. There needs to be a redesign of the care system.

The current system is not working as well as it might. There are lots of wonderful people doing fantastic work within it but there are currently around 1,700 providers of social care in the UK. The system is opaque and very difficult to navigate. The provision for those who need care is inadequate. The recommendation is not to reform the present system but to redesign a new system. This would involve: a simplified assessment leading to guaranteed budget for those who need care; people being trusted to manage their own care and determine what they need (known as 'co-production'); and independent advocacy which would enable people to access their rights and entitlements. As part of the process, the Commission looked at some similar systems already in place in Germany, Japan and Australia.

*Issues not addressed*

- There are two big issues that the Commission deliberately did not address.
- The Commission did not look at funding. The main reason for this was because lots of other people have done reports on funding and, in the end, how it is funded is very much a political decision which has to be made by politicians.
- The Commission did not go into detail on the re-design. That was because part of that would emerge from the development of the National Care Covenant and the dialogue that is necessary.

*Implementation*

- With regard to implementing the report, the Commission is conscious that there have been a number of reports across recent decades and some have ended up on dusty shelves. It is keen to ensure that this does not happen to this one. Commission members have had meetings with Ministers and Shadow Ministers. They are deliberately not being party political, but are appealing to all parties.
- It is very clear that the whole process needs institutions to work together – politicians, faith groups, local communities and so on. He is going to Australia in February to look at their systems, and a church-based care project in particular, to see whether that might have some resonance here.
- They are attempting to set up debates on the topic in Parliament.
- They are aware that although they produced a report and were intending to launch it a few months ago (it had been delayed because of death of Late Queen), the current timing is quite auspicious because the current debate that is raging about social care is involving the media and a lot of people are engaged with it.

*Faith groups*

- With regard to faith groups in particular, all have a role to play in contributing to those changing attitudes and establishing the values mentioned.

- Communities can step up the engagement projects that they already have and make available the places that are part of their communities. That has implications for social prescribing as well.
- Perhaps faith groups can be involved in helping to promote a large scale public campaign for a National Care Covenant.
- Faith groups may also have a role to play in providing advocacy, particularly through understanding of local needs.
- Faith groups can also emphasise the dimension of spiritual care which has been ignored in some other reports.

11. Rabbi Wollenberg thanked Bishop Newcome for his presentation and invited any questions or comments. The following points were raised. Responses from Bishop Newcome and Dr Dixon are in italics.

- What were the next steps and what did the timeline look like?  
*Members of the Commission would be meeting the following week to discuss how to raise this further in Parliament, particularly in the House of Lords. He would also be meeting with Baroness Andrews, who had chaired the House of Lord Select Committee, to talk about the possibility of debates. He and Dr Dixon and others would be having conversations in the near future about implementation. A lot depended on the political world. More meetings with Ministers were planned. [Bishop Newcome]*
- Communities lacked information. It was a daunting maze of sources when looking for care. Any simplification would help.  
*A redesign of the system would involve simplification. Advocacy was very important, ie people who understood the system could help others to work out how to apply. Everyone had a responsibility. One could not just look to the state. [Bishop Newcome]*
- North Somerset County Council used to have care coordinators and anybody needing care would contact a care coordinator to guide them through the maze. Perhaps that was something to follow through.  
*That was a great example of how communities and volunteers could play a valuable role in signposting and support. The redesign would desirably include that advocacy in community infrastructure so everybody everywhere could benefit from that type of support. The Commission had been clear that it would like local authorities to see faith groups as a critical part of that structure and it would like to see more of them signing up to the Faith Covenant. Somerset was a great example. The aim was for everybody to receive first contact care in the community. The Commission would also like to see more faith-based buildings being used as community hubs. There was a need to equip faith community leaders better and the Commission might be looking to produce some resources on an inter faith basis. [Dr Dixon]*
- Of the 1,700 care providers, how many were faith based?  
*A very small proportion were. An example would be Methodist Homes for the Aged -MHA. Many were not and many were for-profit organisations which was one of the issues. [Bishop Newcome]*
- Was there anything in the report about integration of social care with the health service?  
*That integration was crucial. The Commission was hoping that the new integrated health boards around the country would begin to make a big difference on that front. If the system were to be redesigned, then making use of those and developing the kind of programmes they were talking about would be very important. There were thousands of people in hospital who did not need to be*

*there but had no provision in the community for the care that they required. Integration would certainly make a huge difference to the National Health Service but was not the reason for the Commission's recommendation. [Bishop Newcome]*  
*As part of the Commission's work, the National Care Forum (NCF) brought together a group of faith based not for profit providers from within its membership. That had proven very positive and it would like to grow that faith-based forum. If FCF members knew any faith based care providers, they could encourage them to become members of the NCF and to join its faith forum. [Dr Dixon]*

- Not everyone was part of a faith group. Attitudes to care and support should be re-thought. To change the attitudes of the nation, there needed to be collaboration with the education system. Children could be encouraged to volunteer from an early age to become accustomed to caring for others and the UK could become a nation of people who were aware of care needs from a young age. Another country had a time bank where people banked volunteering hours by caring for others, that they could then draw on when they needed care.  
*The point about the education system was a good reminder. The volunteer bank idea was fascinating. It was just the type of idea one might discuss as part of a National Care Covenant. [Bishop Newcome]*
- The number of faith-based care providers had probably been underestimated. During Covid-19, faith groups, in particular, had increased their support to local communities. The problem was that faith communities were often not recognised in terms of their work because it was done locally and they needed more organisation and capacity building. They were a rich resource.  
*One of the problems being discussed recently was the issue of funding. Often groups affiliated to a religion were not eligible for funding. That was a real issue that needed tackling. [Bishop Newcome]*
- Had there been any pushback to the involvement of religious communities?  
*So far there had not been anyone saying that they would have nothing to do with the Commission because it was religious. [Bishop Newcome]*
- The need to rethink attitudes before going into redesigning was important. There was much that could be done to create health, rather than just to treat those who were ill. The spiritual dimension was clearly part of that - one that was perhaps not clearly represented or understood in Britain, where 37% of the population self-identified as non-religious. Faith groups could sometimes be seen as a delivery vehicle for the faith and social care sector, rather than a more active partner in creating wellbeing. The cultural shift would ideally be part of that, acknowledging that faith communities did not just have conveniently located buildings, but were doing work to create belonging, wellness and flourishing in and of themselves.
- The Commission had been set up in an Anglican context. It would be interesting to consider what the non-conformist element would look like in the proposed National Care Covenant.

12. Rabbi Wollenberg thanked Bishop Newcome and Dr Dixon again for attending and for the work that they were doing.

*Bishop Newcome, Dr Dixon and Mr Fremont-Brown left the meeting.*

## **Agenda Item 5: National faith communities and inter faith / inter religious engagement**

13. Rabbi Wollenberg explained that there would be two contributions to this Agenda Item. Rajnish Kashyap, General Secretary of the Hindu Council (UK) would be

speaking about 'The importance of 'side-by-side' engagement on social issues and the benefits to that' and Peter Colwell, Deputy Secretary General of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland would be speaking about 'Strategic engagement'. He welcomed them both.

*The importance of 'side-by-side' engagement on social issues and the benefits to that*

14. Rabbi Wollenberg said that the late Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks had spoken often about the idea of 'side-by-side' engagement. Faith communities had always struggled with theology, as this often led to challenges. Rabbi Sacks had taught that it was important to find issues where there was shared ground, when people from different backgrounds could sit side by side to work together, for example on social care or the impacts of poverty or crime. Sometimes this was also needed between groups within the same communities.
15. Mr Rainish Kashyap thanked IFN for inviting him to speak to the meeting. He offered the following reflections.
  - The Hindu Council (UK) was formed to look after the Hindu community as well as working with others.
  - The involvement of faith communities in social issues was not always recognised, but that changed a lot when the pandemic came and it impacted everyone. There was a shift and people recognised that faith communities have a tremendous amount of experience and knowledge.
  - During the pandemic I was part of the taskforce on reopening places of worship.
  - When people were first invited to have a Covid-19 vaccination, there was some hesitancy in coming forward. We were able to bring people together with medical experts to highlight the benefits of the vaccine. This is just one example of the ways in which communities can help others.
  - Before our work in relation to the Covid-19 vaccination, we have always been involved in organ and blood donation. For a number of reasons, perhaps diet or genetics, many in the Hindu community have kidney problems and blood pressure issues.
  - Organ donation is very important. Our aim is to encourage discussion among Hindus and those from South Asian communities about organ donation and to break down the barriers created by a lack of awareness and religious taboos. It is anticipated that that will lead to more dialogue and conversation about the law changes on donation.
  - We are fortunate that Mr Kirit Mistry (South Asian Health Action Charity) has been doing organ donation projects for many years.
  - A recent NHS Blood and Transplant (NHSBT) activity report showed a rise in Black and Minority Ethnic community donations, but there is not enough accurate data on this. We would like to support the NHSBT in this and increase organ donation.
  - We have done many projects in this area. For example, we did one during Diwali with South Asian Health Action, working with Christian, Jain, Muslim, and South Asian communities, to raise awareness. Since Covid-19 there has been a shift in people's perception. Community-led organisations needs to be involved. It is easier to tackle issues once there is more awareness.
  - We have also recently done projects on breast cancer awareness and strokes and we are setting up a Rotary Club organ donations scheme.

- Most of the people involved are volunteers, helping in their own time. This type of work needs funding. Hopefully the Government will realise this.
  - Organ donation is important for all communities. This is one of those social issues where faiths can work together and help each other.
  - We work with many different faiths, across different projects. We have always taken part in Holocaust Memorial Day. This year, very kindly, Ms Laura Marks, Chair of the HMD Trust, asked us to be part of their project. Dialogue is very important.
  - Faiths do not agree on all issues. But we can tackle many social issues by working together step by step.
16. Rabbi Wollenberg thanked Mr Kashyap and invited any questions or comments.
17. In discussion the following points were raised:
- The campaigns to raise awareness had been very helpful. Faith communities working together symbolically had made a key difference in opening discussion on some of the more sensitive issues.
  - Virtual meetings during the pandemic about health issues had worked well in the Hindu community. They had included academics such as Dr Bharat Pankhania from Exeter University. The Census had also helped to gel the community together. It had been an opportunity to reach out to people *via* virtual meetings and other media to make sure everybody understood what was happening. Organ donation was very important.
  - The presentation had been very interesting. As had been mentioned earlier, positive action was important. It was said that the individual was central but in order for them to know that they were central, a good deal of work needed to be done on them. This was very important in terms of organ donation because the problems that stood in the way of it, including in the Buddhist community, were often deeply held prejudices which affected people's ability to think clearly about the issue.
  - The idea of a volunteering bank was introduced by the Communist Party in China. It had led to an autocratic way of dealing with people where volunteering did not come from their true agency or independence, which was a spiritual one. The development of agency enabled people to give freely of themselves.
  - Jain organisations had been holding a number of virtual seminars, with experts, raising awareness of health matters. There had recently been one about prostate cancer. They were also exploring the issue of living donations, for example kidney donations.
18. Dr Crabtree commented that the interrelationship between dialogue and social action had been much commented on over the years within FCF, and with IFN more broadly. When communities worked together on particular issues, they also ended up having broader conversations and deepening relationships.
19. Mr Kashyap reiterated the importance of raising awareness about organ donation, especially within South Asian communities. Sometimes people went to South Asia for organ donation and organs were taken based on monetary value. People needed to be fully aware of the situation.
20. Dr Crabtree asked if the FCF might wish to return to the topic of organ donation was within a future agenda item on health. This was agreed.



**Action: Health, and in particular organ donation, to be on the Agenda of a future FCF meeting.**

*Reflections on strategic engagement*

21. Mr Peter Colwell thanked IFN for inviting him to speak to the meeting. He offered the following reflections.

- CTBI and its predecessor, the British Council of Churches, has been working in the area of inter faith since at least the 1970s. That arose out of the concerns at the time for racial justice, with the rise of Far Right rhetoric. Although there has been significant change since then, some of these issues are still around and coming back in new forms.
- Some of the inter faith work that CTBI does is directly about engagement and inter faith dialogue. Other work is shared with other specialisms, such as around refugees and racial justice. The work could be described as resourcing member churches to engage around inter faith work, but CTBI also works with partners on particular pieces of inter faith work.
- The work can be split into four main areas:

1) Promoting dialogue

In the past, CTBI has produced study guides on resources produced by the World Council of Churches which explore principles around inter faith engagement. Because such documents can be difficult to follow, CTBI has taken key aspects of those documents and illustrated them with examples of good practice of dialogue and cooperation in local communities around the country. Those have been greatly appreciated particularly at local level. CTBI is also considering how it might explore engagement beyond the Abrahamic family of faiths as it has perhaps in recent years put too much emphasis on that and is hoping to redress the balance.

2) Engaging with pluralism

During the pandemic Pope Francis called on people of faith to pray for those affected by Covid-19. That provoked a debate within the CTBI membership about whether people of different faiths could come together to pray together. Some members were very comfortable with this and others were not. Often faith communities, including FCF members, take part together in vigils, at times of emergency or national disaster. So, CTBI has produced some guidelines for churches on how to engage with other faith traditions at times of national emergency. It has also produced resources and organised conferences about what to do when you are invited to participate in the religious rituals of another faith, or when there is a need to include someone from another faith tradition in Christian worship. It has also been thinking about some of the issues around mission and evangelism and how that relates to dialogue and also whether mission and evangelism is something that is desirable in a plural society.

3) Overcoming prejudice and promoting justice

This is the area that is moving away from traditional inter faith work, but nevertheless is still very important. As an organisation, CTBI has a strong concern for the plight of refugees, as do many FCF members. The Churches' Refugee Network does extensive work in that area. Some of the political rhetoric around refugees, such as the language of 'invasion', is deeply troubling and CTBI is seeking to find a more friendly, and less heated, rhetoric.

CTBI has also done some work on gender justice, producing a book of stories/testimonies of women of different faith traditions, called 'Her Faith

Matters'. That was a very successful publication and has led to some follow up webinars on the theme.

CTBI has worked with the Council of Christians and Jews in producing resources on antisemitism and is now working with the Christian Muslim Forum on a similar resource on islamophobia.

4) Geo-political issues (including international engagement)

CTBI works with the National Council of Sri Lanka on particular projects.

CTBI has a longstanding interest and engagement around Israel Palestine which has particular inter faith implications in this country.

CTBI is a stakeholder in the UK Freedom of Religion or Belief Forum.

- One of the main issues that CTBI is dealing with is that many of its member Churches that promote inter religious dialogue are Churches that have history with British colonialism. CTBI sees it as a real priority at the moment to think through some of its assumptions around inter faith and how some of them arise out of colonialism. Some FCF members may be able to assist with that as it moves forward.

22. Rabbi Wollenberg thanked Mr Colwell and invited any questions or comments.

23. In discussion the following points were made. Responses from Mr Colwell are in italics.

- The presentations had been very interesting. All the themes pointed to there being many common beliefs between faith communities in terms of, for example, the value of human life, dignity, justice, equality, and fighting prejudice. Obviously there were theological differences. However, the issues everyone was facing socially were related to those shared core values, rather than to different manifestations of god. There were many issues on which faith communities could work together. The difference with faith communities was that these visions and ideas had been formed through deep belief. If faith communities could work together on shared issues, teaching core values, then such forums could have an important role and perhaps fill areas not covered by Government.
- It was very encouraging to hear about the issues being tackled by CTBI. Prejudice was not limited to antisemitism and Islamophobia. Sometimes other communities were involved. After the 9/11 attacks there had been prejudice against Muslims. However, the first person killed in the United States was a Sikh, and that could have been because of mistaken identity. Prejudice against the Sikh community was sometimes ignored.  
*Yes, other communities were impacted. CTBI was doing a lot of work around anti-racism and was looking at how other communities were being targeted as well.*
- 'Anti-racism' was a general banner. Every community would have its particular sensitivities. There were aspects of antisemitism that some in the Jewish community felt that others outside the community might not understand. The same might be said for Islamophobia and for prejudice against other communities. It might be worth considering, within the anti-racism discussion, where an umbrella approach was needed and where an approach specific to communities would be more appropriate. It was a challenging area.
- It would be valuable to have more understanding of colonial mindsets in inter faith work. It was noticeable that there were sometimes feelings of good intentions of being welcoming and inclusive of people from other backgrounds, but not necessarily identifying the colonial mindsets that people had grown up with and which were reflected in British society. Society in Britain today was only at the beginning of understanding the impact of its colonial heritage.

24. Rabbi Wollenberg thanked both speakers again and invited members to discuss how they would like to continue to explore this area of their work.
25. Dr Crabtree noted that the two presentations had been the first in a planned series of presentations on faith communities and their inter faith engagement, whether that be through faith and social action or through dialogue. It would be helpful to hear if there were particular reflections that FCF members had on aspects of how national faith communities were engaging, as this would help to frame the Agenda for future meetings. These could either be raised now or sent by email to the IFN office.
26. In discussion the following points were made. Responses from the Executive Director are in italics.
- Was there a way to collate the faith communities' projects into an online forum that FCF members could access?  
*That would be likely to go beyond IFN's resources since, happily, there was a growing number of projects. The idea could be explored with the Board if the FCF wished.*
  - The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (CBCEW) had taken a more structured approach and had produced a theological document in 2010 called 'Meeting God in Friend and Stranger'. It had been very useful in areas of inter religious dialogue. It would be good to have the opportunity to explain at a future meeting the approach that CBCEW was taking.  
*So, one idea would be for people to talk in a little more depth about some of the ways that their bodies were engaging and their bases for that.*
  - The participant from the Board of Deputies of British Jews would be happy to give an input on what the Jewish community was doing in the inter faith space.

***Action: Next FCF meeting to continue the series on inter faith engagement from faith communities.***

27. Members were then invited to offer brief updates on faith communities' inter faith projects/meetings, including joint work on social issues.
28. An FCF member said that this would be an exciting year for the Jain community as the grand opening of the Jain Centre in north London was due to be in the first week of August. The Centre had been a project of the late Dr Natubhai Shah MBE. Jain groups would all be coming together under one roof and it would also include a community centre.

*Agenda Item 7 was taken before Agenda Item 6.*

*Ms Fazila Aswat joined the meeting.*

### **Agenda Item 7: The Coronation and the 'Big Help Out'**

29. Canon Barber welcomed Ms Fazila Aswat of the Together coalition. She would be speaking about the 'Big Help Out', which was one of the Coronation Weekend events.
30. Ms Aswat thanked IFN for inviting her to speak to the meeting. She offered the following reflections.

### *Background*

- Faith groups are an integral part of our communities. Across the UK we see faith communities creating bonds and building bridges and they are essential for all national campaigns.
- One of the key ambitions of the Together Coalition is to build connection and to build communities where people respect each other, share values and embrace diversity.
- Most faith-based organisations have volunteers in some capacity, although not always in a formally structured way.
- Volunteering and faith communities are a bridging connection for lots of communities. For example, in my local area, North Kirklees Interfaith does brilliant work engaging people, collaborating, promoting diversity and respect for each other, as well as raising awareness.
- Volunteering is not new, but the gift of time is essential for connecting communities and driving shared values.
- The Together Coalition has nearly 350 partners from across all sectors, including music, sport, education, media and faith, and is also informally in touch with around 200 organisations. Thousands of individuals are also registered with the Coalition.
- The Coalition has previously run a programme called 'Talk Together' and across the last two years it has also organised 'Thank You Day'. Following last year's 'Thank You Day' the Coalition ran some ICM polling. One of the big issues that came up repeatedly was that the pandemic has had a huge affect on volunteering levels in communities. It showed that the recovery period was not as fast as people had hoped it would be and lots of organisations, from Girlguiding to local foodbanks, are struggling to get volunteers. This is at the same time as the cost of living crisis which has resulted in increased demand. Foodbanks in my area have increased from one to five. People have not returned to volunteering for a number of reasons. Perhaps they are now more cautious. Perhaps some of the older demographic is not as available. So there is a crisis in the voluntary sector.
- That is why the Big Help Out was created as part of the Coronation Weekend events.

### *The Big Help Out*

- The Big Help Out is the campaign that launches on Monday 8 May.
- The Together Coalition has worked with 25 voluntary organisations, including Shaping the Future, Scouts, Girlguiding and the NCVO, and also the Royal Household on the Big Help Out.
- The Big Help Out is a mass campaign, using the Coronation weekend to reach millions of people and promote volunteering to help to fill the gap created by the pandemic and the cost of living crisis and to encourage people to either start, or return, to volunteering. It is important to ensure that everybody has an opportunity to engage.
- The Coalition is very conscious that it should not be just one day with lots of media attention. The aim is to create a domino effect. The Big Help Out will be the launch but there will then be other campaign Days/Weeks, such as Volunteers Week, Good Relations Week (in Northern Ireland), Thank You Day, Inter Faith Week and Mitzvah Day which can be used to keep the momentum going and promote and celebrate volunteering.

- The Coalition would like to invite faith communities and organisations to come on the journey with it. Some of the work being done by faith communities is so important for cohesion and bonding and it would be good to replicate that and promote it in every community in the UK.
  - The Big Help Out is promoting and celebrating volunteering. One of its aims is to build resilient communities because the pandemic and the cost of living crisis are testing everyone. The Coalition has done a lot of work with Citizens Advice and it is clear that the cost of living crisis will have an impact across the whole nation for at least the rest of this year.
  - The Big Help Out is not just about creating new volunteers; it is also about recognising existing work. There are many volunteers in faith communities doing great work and it is important to celebrate them. The Royal Voluntary Service is working on Coronation Champions, which will enable people to nominate and celebrate volunteers. That is likely to be live in March or April.
  - The public launch of the Big Help Out will be in March when the website will be up and running and people can register for volunteering opportunities.
  - How can faith communities help? Please tell your networks about the Big Help Out and its aims. If you have your own opportunities for volunteering, you can register them on the website or hold taster sessions or drop-in sessions on Monday 8 May. The Coalition wants to ensure that any sessions held are welcoming and are not a pressured environment because people might want to think about it and take contact details rather than sign up on the day. An example of a volunteering project on the day might be people coming together to do a random act of kindness, such as a clean up. People might then be interested to come back at later times in the year when you have other volunteering needs.
  - You can register on the website to get updates or email the Coalition directly.
31. Canon Barber thanked Ms Aswat and invited any questions or comments, including the sharing of any plans for the Coronation Weekend.
32. In discussion the following points were made. Responses from Ms Aswat are in italics.
- Was all the information available on the website?  
*Yes. <https://thebighelpout.org.uk> This was currently a holding page until March, but there was a page to register for updates.*
  - Was the Coalition looking for volunteers?  
*No. The idea was for organisations, such as faith bodies, to register their volunteering opportunities on the website and for members of the public to sign up. The aim was to mobilise volunteering. Volunteering was a catalyst for social connection in communities.*
  - Safeguarding was often an issue for volunteering. How would this be handled?  
*The Big Help Out would not be the deliverer. So, it would be up to the individual organisations advertising the volunteering opportunities to be responsible for DBS checks, training and so forth. The doit.org website would be used for people to register.*
  - Was the Government organising the Big Help Out?  
*No. It was being organised by a coalition of about 25 voluntary organisations involved, including eg The Scouts, NCVO, a music charity and a dementia charity.*
  - For the Jewish community it would be best to channel everything through Mitzvah Day and the Jewish Volunteering Network.

*The Coalition had already been in touch with them. Every organisation would put their own volunteering opportunities online and people would be able to respond directly.*

- It would be good to have as much information as possible to cascade down through networks.

*Perhaps further information could be circulated via IFN when it was available. Dr Crabtree said that IFN could certainly share information. Announcements had recently been made about events taking place for the Coronation Weekend. IFN was engaging with the Together Coalition and would share information with members. Perhaps it might be possible to explore ways to enable inter faith volunteering, learning from Mitzvah Day and other initiatives.*

- A member said that their local synagogue would be using the Big Help Out as a springboard to get people to come along who would not otherwise be interested in volunteering.

*That was the aim. Polling showed that the Together Coalition had reached 8.5 million people in the context of the Jubilee celebrations, so hopefully at least half of that number could be reached through the Big Help Out. Volunteering could seem daunting for people, especially if a regular commitment was needed. This was about creating a space for people to explore opportunities.*

- Would the Big Help Out be ongoing?

*The Big Help Out was the one-off launch, but it would then be encouraged through the special weeks mentioned earlier.*

- Would there be a media campaign? Outreach might be needed for certain communities.

*Yes. And there should be room for the inter faith space to get attention and some media outlet as well. Dr Crabtree said that perhaps some people from faith communities could talk about the importance of volunteering in the faith context.*

- Monday 8 May was a Bank Holiday. A lot of community projects might not be running that day.

*It was hoped that there would be a mixture of opportunities –physical and online opportunities on the day but also future and ongoing opportunities to sign up for.*

- There was a hope that churches across the nation would ring their bells for the Coronation and many of them needed volunteer bellringers. There was no reason why people of different faith communities could not take part.

33. Dr Crabtree noted that while not everyone was a monarchist and wanted to mark a jubilee or a coronation, IFN always highlighted significant national (UK) moments. The Big Help Out was helpful in that it was broader. IFN was happy to link and liaise as was helpful.

34. Rabbi Wollenberg thanked Ms Aswat again for her presentation.

*Ms Aswat left the meeting.*

## **Agenda Item 6: Other issues of interest and concern**

35. Canon Barber, taking the chair, 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 been notified.

36. In discussion the following points were made:

- The Hindu Forum of Britain had started a group, holding virtual meetings to talk about the environment and climate change in regard to places of worship and community centres. It had started by discussing the use of plastic cutlery for meals and so forth and had since moved to talking about planting trees and the use of air conditioning and double glazing. The sessions had been very interesting.
- Faith communities had a lot to teach about caring for the environment.

## **INTER FAITH NETWORK MATTERS SESSION**

### **Agenda Item 8: IFN Matters**

[Paragraphs 37 to 50]

#### **Close of meeting**

51. Rabbi Wollenberg thanked everyone for attending, in person and online, and for their contributions. The date for the next FCF meeting would be circulated in due course.
52. Participants were then invited to stay for a sandwich lunch and a visit to the synagogue.
53. IFN's Project Assistant, Mr Aled Vernon-Rees, and IFN's Intern, Mr Leo Taylor, joined participants for lunch and the synagogue visit.

24 March 2023