

THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK

Note of Link Meeting for Local Inter Faith Groups in the East Midlands Region of England

from 2pm to 3.30pm on Monday 29 June 2020

by Zoom

Present: Mr Shashi Dholakia MBE (Wellingborough Inter-Faith Group); Anthony Gimpel (Loughborough Council of Faiths); Mr Ken Howlett (Northampton InterFaith Council); Mr Harminder Singh Jagdev (Leicester Council of Faiths); Mr Andrew Jeffries (Inter Faith Forum for Leicestershire); Mrs Jasmit Kaur Phull (Lincoln Interfaith Forum); Ms Surendra Malhotra (Northampton InterFaith Council), Mr Godfrey Nix (Nottingham Inter Faith Council); Mr Andrew Presland (East Northants Faith Group); Mr Riaz Ravat MBE (St Philip's Centre); Ms Patricia Stoa (Nottingham Inter Faith Council); Mr Clive Tully (Lincoln Inter-Faith Forum); and Mr Narendra Waghela (Leicester Council of Faiths).

In attendance: Mr Ashley Beck; Dr Harriet Crabtree; Dr David Hampshire; and Ms Madiha Hussein (Inter Faith Network for the UK).

Agenda Item 1: Welcome and introduction

1. Dr David Hampshire, in the chair, welcomed those present and invited them to introduce themselves.
2. A period of silence was kept to remember all those working in building inter faith relations, those who had lost their lives due to Covid-19 and those who were affected by the pandemic.
3. Dr Hampshire explained that this was the third regional link meeting IFN had held so far in 2020 for local groups. The first two had been in Kent and the North West of England (in Preston). This was the first virtual link meeting, and it was for local inter faith groups in the East Midlands region of England.

Agenda Item 2: IFN and COVID-19

4. Dr Harriet Crabtree said that since the COVID-19 pandemic in Britain began, IFN had focused much of its activity on supporting member bodies and sharing good practice. This had included a webinar which IFN held, linked to the Great Get Together, for local groups anywhere in the UK. IFN had also held meetings for other categories of membership. The national faith community bodies meet as the Faith Communities Forum, and this had been meeting monthly with a particular focus on COVID-19 related matters. Local groups would be aware from their own contexts that there were many things which faith communities were engaging with, such as reopening places of worship, and handling of funerals.

5. Faith groups had also been helping communities in amazing ways during the pandemic. IFN's Project Assistant, Madiha Hussein, had been keeping its website (www.interfaith.org.uk/news/covid19) up to date with information about this, and about the ways local inter faith groups had been responding. This was in addition to Circulars to member bodies.
6. This had been a challenging time for many local groups. Dr Crabtree noted that she had been phoning around the groups since the start of the pandemic. Many groups were carrying on with their activities up to a point, but needing to cancel in-person meetings. Most seemed to be adapting to holding meetings over Zoom and similar technologies. Perhaps the question of how groups can use virtual technologies to carry out activity and to mark Inter Faith Week could be returned to later in the meeting. Some local group members had featured in virtual Inter Faith Week activity last year through a short series of video interviews, which IFN recorded across the Week.

Agenda Item 3: Sharing of news

7. Dr Hampshire said that sharing of news, information and experience was a very important part of link meetings. He invited groups to share.
8. There was a roundtable sharing of news and information about groups represented. The contributions are listed below in alphabetical order of the name of the bodies. The listed points relating to each contribution reflect both those made in the reports and also in response to questions.

East Northants Faith Group

9. Mr Andrew Presland spoke about East Northants Faith Group (ENFG).
 - ENFG was founded in approximately 2004 by the District Council's community development officer, working with members of local faith groups.
 - ENFG ran a night shelter, addiction recovery house, a community café and a foodbank.
 - The foodbank had been busier than usual, while the café and shelter are suspended due to COVID-19.
 - ENFG aimed to deal with topics of interest to people of faith and non-faith through a regular community leaders' lunch, including secular community workers, councillors and officers.
 - ENFG had chosen not to hold any leaders' lunches via Zoom, as it saw a lot of the value of meetings as being in the informal networking over sandwiches, which was hard to replicate virtually.
 - ENFG tried to act as a voice of faith groups in East Northamptonshire – for example on planned housing developments and community engagement with the Rushden Lakes retail development
 - ENFG had a monthly newsletter which was sent to over 200 people in the district.
 - East Northants Friends of Refugees worked with groups in Wellingborough, Northampton and Kettering, and its work was continuing via Zoom.

Leicester Council of Faiths

10. Mr Harminder Singh Jagdev and Mr Narendra Waghela spoke about Leicester Council of Faiths (LCoF).

- LCoF was founded over 40 years ago.
- LCoF worked with different faith groups in Leicester.
- It had had its first Zoom meeting the previous week.
- LCoF sent a regular mailing to its members.
- It had many well known, longstanding members.
- At points in the past it had received funding from the City Council. This had enabled it to organise school visits, cultural events and other activities.
- Eventually, the Council could no longer keep funding LCoF, which made its work challenging to continue.
- However, it had been able to rebuild, and now held workshops in different venues rather than in its own offices.
- COVID-19 had in some ways energised LCoF, for example it had led it to form a WhatsApp group, enabling it to stay in touch more regularly during lockdown.
- The City Mayor had invited LCoF to join the City Resilience Forum, which meets weekly via Zoom. That had been working with funeral homes, crematoria and others. It had also worked with Voluntary Action Leicestershire to recruit volunteers to help move bodies into cold storage where necessary.
- Lots of faith organisations in Leicester had been offering free food and meals, and grocery shopping assistance for the elderly and vulnerable.
- The Resilience Forum had also discussed the mental health impacts of COVID-19 and domestic violence.

Leicestershire Inter Faith Forum

11. Mr Andrew Jeffreys spoke about Leicestershire Inter Faith Forum (LIFF).

- There were many proactive inter faith bodies in Leicestershire, including the St Philip's Centre (SPC) and Leicester Council of Faiths.
- SPC ran faith awareness training for Leicestershire Council employees.
- There had been lots of response to COVID-19 on the ground, and the County Council (for which he worked) had tried to get out of the way of things happening organically.
- LIFF had played a messenger role, cascading messages between organisations, including from the Council and the coroner.
- Access to technology had been an issue, and ensuring those without online access were also reached is vital. This would continue to be something needing addressing in the recovery phase too, to ensure people did not remain digitally excluded.
- It was important to consider how to mark and engage with Inter Faith Week this year in ways that ensured people felt the human connection.

Lincoln Interfaith Forum

12. Mrs Jasmit Kaur Phulland Mr Clive Tully spoke about Lincoln Interfaith Forum (LIF).

- LIF was founded around 25 years ago by a Methodist minister.
- LIF members were mainly from Lincolnshire and meetings were held in Lincoln.
- LIF was interested in connecting with IFN and Clive Tully was the link person.
- The majority of LIF's members were over 60.
- Sharing stories had been an approach members found very uplifting.
- LIF members had been taking part in collective prayer at 7pm each day in response to lockdown. Everyone did this in their own way, according to their own tradition, but at the same time.
- LIF was widely known and respected in Lincoln, and the Mayor had also joined the group.
- LIF had been holding Zoom discussion meetings on different topics.
- It was encouraging that the group had been able to keep meeting and making a useful contribution in the current context.
- A peace and reconciliation centre was being built in Lincoln, linked to the Multi-Faith Chaplaincy at the University.
- A benefit of virtual meetings had been that people were able to take part from further away, including France and Malta. This opened up new possibilities for the future.

Loughborough Council of Faiths

13. Mr Anthony Gimpel spoke about Loughborough Council of Faiths (LCF).

- LCF had been established over 30 years ago.
- It usually met monthly.
- LCF had begun to hold meetings via Zoom in the last couple of weeks.
- It had been very good to see people and catch up.
- There had been a sense that many places of worship locally had been going their own way, rather than interacting much as they respond to COVID-19.
- LCF would continue to meet monthly via Zoom.

Northampton InterFaith Council

14. Mr Ken Howlett and Ms Surendra Malhotra spoke about Northampton InterFaith Council (NIC).

- NIC was like a family in some ways. The group knew each other well.
- The Chair rotated between faiths every 2 years.
- 2 years ago, NIC created a film with local primary school children called 'I am Human', which was screened in local theatres.

- Artwork on the same theme had been commissioned from local schools, and linked assemblies were held. The artwork had been included on a roll-up banner.
- NIC was now working to create an activity book for primary age children.
- NIC had sent a press release to local radio, media and the national media following the death of George Floyd. This included a statement. Members had been interviewed on local radio linked to this. NIC wished to promote friendship, understanding and respect in the community.
- Different faiths in Northampton were also serving the community at this time. For example, the Sikh community were providing langar sewa; and the Bangladeshi community had given out hygiene packs.
- Two Northampton Sikh community charities had recently received The Queen's Award for Voluntary Service.
- NIC had been involved in a project with the National Trust but that was currently on hold due to the pandemic.

Nottingham Inter Faith Council

15. Ms Patricia Stoat and Mr Godfrey Nix spoke about Nottingham Inter Faith Council (NIFC).
- NIFC had been around for over 35 years.
 - NIFC was a relatively small group with good relationships.
 - Many of the members of NIFC or their partners were shielding due to COVID-19.
 - Meetings via Zoom had happened, where members discussed mutual support and exchanging experiences.
 - NIFC had good links with faith communities and wider community groups.
 - Nottingham Council had acted fast to contact vulnerable groups at the beginning of the pandemic.
 - Faith communities and faith-based charities had really helped support the vulnerable, including food provision.
 - NIFC had been raising awareness of domestic violence and how to get help in the current lockdown context. This included raising awareness for faith leaders.
 - NIFC was hoping to be back up and running by the time of Inter Faith Week, as it had many plans and commitments for the Week, not all of which would work virtually.
 - Some members were elderly and don't have computer access, so keeping in touch via phone had been a lifeline for them. Some had not spoken to anyone for weeks.

St Philip's Centre

16. Mr Riaz Ravat spoke about the St Philip's Centre (SPC).
- SPC was founded in 2006 in Leicester.
 - It was a resourcing organisation, while the LCoF was a representative body.
 - SPC was an ecumenical Christian charity that did inter faith work.

- Its work included activities with schools and colleges, dialogue activities, and it employed the Prevent officer for Leicestershire.
- It was a Near Neighbours area hub.
- SPC's work had been dominated by technology over the last few months. Using Zoom, Teams, Rainbow and other programs had enabled more people to take part than would have usually, which was positive.
- There were, however, many who had not been comfortable with the technology or preferred to meet face-to-face.
- COVID-19 had added an additional barrier between people of different faiths and beliefs in some ways.
- SPC had observed an increase in hate, with people using social media to circulate poisonous messages.
- SPC had begun a programme encouraging dialogue between Hindu and Muslim families, which had been based around hosting meals in homes like 'Come Dine With Me'. The families were now using Zoom and WhatsApp to stay in touch.
- School teachers were experiencing challenges with returning to school.
- There remained much good will and interest in getting people to connect. The return to normal will have to include bringing people together!

Wellingborough Inter Faith Group

17. Mr Shashi Dholakia spoke about Wellingborough Inter Faith Group (WIFG).
- WIFG had been running for 35 years.
 - Cynthia Bailey was often seen as the 'mother' of the Group.
 - It met at the Victoria Centre, where it had been meeting since it began.
 - The Centre was widely used by smaller faith communities when they first arrived in Wellingborough, so felt like shared ground. Many of the communities had since built or purchased their own spaces.
 - Wellingborough had communities which had worked closely together, and this collaboration had grown over time.
 - Faith leaders got together, particularly when responding to issues in the community.
 - WIFG ran roundtable style activities with primary age children, called 'carousel of faiths'. This helped pupils to understand that there was much that faiths have in common.
 - WIFG saw its role in bringing people together as even more important in the present context.
 - WIFG held vigils in the town in response to issues, such as murders or attacks.
 - The membership was mostly older, but there were a few younger people joining.

Agenda Item 4: Inter Faith Week

18. Mr Ashley Beck said that the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures that had been put in place to respond to it meant that Inter Faith Week 2020 would look different from in previous years.

19. IFN had taken the decision in March to plan for two Inter Faith Week scenarios: one where only virtual activities would be taking place, and one where there may be a mixed economy of virtual activities and in-person activities. It was likely that any in-person activities would be limited in size, in order to comply with social distancing requirements. A number of related factors added to uncertainty, including:
 - the possibility of a 'second spike' resulting in another period of national lockdown;
 - localised/ regional lockdowns;
 - people possibly being less willing to attend in-person meetings even if there was officially no bar to holding them.
20. IFN would be sending out mailings across the summer with activity ideas for different types of groups. These would include ideas for virtual and socially distant events.
21. There were many possibilities for online activities, from webinars and Zoom meetings to virtual tours of places of worship and online competitions. It was also possible to make use of/ highlight existing resources, including educational resources.
22. Mr Jeffreys said that lots of events had had to be cancelled or postponed, partly because at the early stages of the pandemic there was not enough time/ advanced warning to re-plan activities online. However, there was plenty of time before Inter Faith Week to plan different kinds of activity. Bringing people together remained very important.
23. Mr Howlett said it was hoped that the pandemic would be over by November so that faith walks to places of worship could take place. These enabled people to interact and ask questions.
24. Dr Crabtree said that IFN was encouraging people to plan virtual opportunities as well – even if just as fall-back options. She had taken part in the Wellingborough Open Doors Day event in 2019, and recorded a short video of one of the presenters at the Hindu Mandir. It was possible to have excellent presentations about places of worship that could be recorded and shared more widely afterwards. The recent Visit My Mosque Day included examples of this. It was also possible to try new activities, such as virtual cook-alongs.
25. Mr Jeffries said one of the opportunities might be to work with other partners. For example, in Leicester, there had been an annual Open House Weekend where buildings opened up to the wider community.
26. Dr Crabtree said that there were challenges but also interesting dimensions to the online world that Covid-19 had necessitated greater use of. For example, it seemed to be bringing younger and older people together more. Online meetings had also sometimes meant more people were able to attend because they didn't need to leave home or travel far to take part. This could be helpful if people had other commitments close to the time of meetings, or were otherwise unable to travel. Zoom also enabled shorter, more focused, meetings in some

circumstances. It might be worthwhile to consider some activities where there were events in advance of the week the fruits which were then shared during Inter Faith Week.

27. Mr Tully said he had been intrigued by the possibilities for links and activities that hadn't been tried before.

Agenda Item 5: Any other issues or concerns

28. None were raised.
29. Dr Crabtree invited IFN's Project Assistant, Madiha Hussein, to say a few words. Her time with IFN would shortly be coming to an end.
30. Ms Madiha Hussein said that it had been a pleasure to work at IFN, particularly working on Inter Faith Week and helping IFN to try new things, such as an online photography competition on social media. Perhaps Inter Faith Week 2020 could see more activities of this kind.
31. Dr Hampshire thanked everyone for attending.

12 April 2020