

## THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK

### Note of Link Meeting for Local Inter Faith Organisations in the South West

from 2.15pm to 4.30pm on Monday 27 June 2022

by Zoom

**Present:** Councillor Tom Aditya (Bristol Multi-Faith Forum); Mrs Jo Backus (Swindon Interfaith Group); Ms Janine Evans (Somerset Informal Group); Revd Canon Dr John Hall (Exeter Faith and Belief Group & Devon Faith and Belief); Ms Anna Kelly (Plymouth Centre for Faiths and Cultural Diversity Inter Faith Dialogue Group); Mr George Mazidian (Bristol Inter Faith Group); Mrs Tripti Megeri (Bristol Multi-Faith Forum); Minister Kim Moore-Cullen (Torbay Faith and Belief Forum); and Ms Ramona Nash (Devon Faith and Belief Forum).

**In attendance:** Dr Harriet Crabtree and Mr Ashley Beck (Inter Faith Network for the UK)

**Apologies:** Bath Interfaith group.

#### Agenda Item 1: Welcome and introduction

1. Mr Ashley Beck, Project Director at the Inter Faith Network, welcomed the participants.
2. He explained that, following IFN's usual practice, there would be a note of the meeting. It would be cleared in draft with participants before final circulation and would in due course be added to the IFN website. If there was anything that a speaker preferred not be minuted, they could indicate when they spoke. Screengrabs of the meeting might be used. If anyone did not wish to be in these, they were asked to indicate. (No objections were raised).

#### Agenda Item 2: Brief Round Table Discussions

3. All present introduced themselves briefly.

*Agenda Item 4 was, by agreement, taken before Agenda Item 3.*

#### Agenda Item 4: Round table sharing by local inter faith organisations of news, information and ideas.

4. Mr Beck invited the participants to speak, within three to four minutes, about their organisations' activities. That should allow time for some questions and comments.

*Bristol Inter Faith Group (BIFG)*

5. Mr George Mazidian said:
- Because of the pandemic, the level of activity of BIFG had greatly reduced.
  - Members had recently taken part in an activity where each participant learned about a faith that was different to their own. It was attended and participated in by about 20 people and was well appreciated.

*Bristol Multi Faith Forum (BMFF)*

6. Councillor Tom Aditya said:
- BMFF hosted an annual Diverse Doors Open Day programme of visits to different places of worship. It was organised to celebrate Bristol's religious diversity and to offer the community the opportunity to visit a range of places of worship. This gave a flavour of the many faiths in Bristol and enabled communities to experience and learn about each other's cultures and beliefs. This year's event had also had a faith trail component; participants had been transported in a minibus from place to place. They had visited a Buddhist shrine; the Bristol and West Progressive Synagogue; an evangelical church; a gurdwara (where they were provided with langar); a Greek Orthodox church; a mosque; and a Hindu temple. BMFF had had very positive feedback from all participants. The Diverse Doors Open Day model was one that others might like to adopt for their own community.
    - BMFF had also been involved in a science workshop programme which was organised in conjunction with the British Science Association. Children from primary and secondary schools had been invited. It had been well attended. Such activity was part of BMFF's contribution to welfare of the wider community.
7. Mrs Tripti Megeri said:
- BMFF was involved in an NHS Blood and Organ Donation scheme. It had received funding for a one-and-a-half-year project. This would involve visiting different faith places to encourage organ donation amongst all faith communities. As well as distributing leaflets, they would be organising tailor-made events for the individual communities because their specific community needs differed.
8. Minister Kim Moore-Cullen requested further information from Cllr Aditya about Diverse Doors Open Days. Her own faith group (Spiritualist) had a presence in Bristol and she wanted to help make the events even more diverse.
9. Ms Ramona Nash said that her group had tried at some point to set up something similar in Devon, or at least in Exeter. This had, however, been thwarted by the pandemic. She was considering organising such an event for Inter Faith Week. She asked why BMFF had decided to choose a different time of year to hold its Day. She asked whether people participated in, or just observed, the acts of worship.

10. Cllr Aditya responded that BMFF informed the universities and chaplaincies in Bristol about the events. It was usually a one-day programme with 45 minutes at each venue and people participating according to their personal preferences. In terms of timing, BMFF used to organise the event for February. However, the summer seemed more likely to attract interest. Also, the Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership had asked them to hold an event in April or May.
11. Dr Crabtree mentioned BMFF's regular use of Facebook to publicise their events and the positive impact of that kind of use of social media.

*Devon Faith and Belief Forum (DFBF)*

12. The Revd Canon Dr John Hall said that:
  - The work of Devon Faith and Belief Forum (DFBF) spanned Devon, which was a large county.
  - DFBF had had a period of significantly reduced activity because of the pandemic. It had only begun meeting and developing again during the latter part of 2021. Its meetings had mainly been in the hybrid Zoom format. It had recently had a Zoom AGM.
  - In just over a week's time, the Forum would be having its annual lecture in the Exeter Guildhall, this year with a speaker from the Sikh community.
  - It was in the process of restarting different activities, such as its environmental group (Devon Earth and Faith Network) and its youth group.
  - It was currently thinking about its new membership policy and how to be inclusive and welcoming to new applications. It had recently revised its constitution.
  - DFBF had done work on a number of social issues. DFBF had also organised some events on child protection and safeguarding in the faith and belief context.
  - Members were currently giving thought to statement-making and how to engage in campaigns and petitions.
  - It had been asked if it could make a list of faith leaders available. Such a list would be helpful in a number of contexts. For example the Cathedral in Exeter had wanted to invite people to the Platinum Jubilee celebrations and wanted to create a representative inclusive list to invite. The Forum was looking at how to put together such a list without breaking GDPR rules and how to make it as representative as possible. This was important work as it demonstrated the profile of the group in the local community.
  - DFBF had a continuing link with the Devon County Council (DCC). The Council provided funding towards the Forum's work. That enabled it to organise activities. There was, however, a need to comply with what the Council expected from the funding. DFBF provides a person to attend meetings of the DCC Equalities Reference Group. It has regular engagement with the Council because of that. The relationship was a two-way one; the Council asks DFBF for advice on issues such as burials and how they might extend burial provision.
  - A Hindu member of the group had created a *Prayers for Peace* booklet.

13. Dr Crabtree noted the work that DFBF had done with Devon County Council on bereavement and care for the dying (this was available on the DCC website). This was one of the links that IFN had highlighted when it was sharing information about faiths and dying matters during the pandemic, at a time when this had a high relevancy because of Covid-19.
14. Ms Nash said:
- DFBF been looking at how chaplaincy recruitment in prisons, hospitals and Higher Education could be done in a truly multifaith way. It was, for example, keen to include humanists and pagans who hadn't traditionally had these positions available to them. There was sometimes a need for a specific faith requirement. However, where there was not, it was important that hiring processes were equitable.
  - It had also hosted an 'Ask a Muslim' event. This had involved getting people to sit around tables. Participants could join a table and ask specific questions about a particular faith. It had been hoping to replicate that but plans had been hindered by the pandemic.
  - DFBF had also been heavily involved in the Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations in Exeter. The primary focus had been genocide of the Jewish community. However, they had also looked at genocide more broadly in relation to other groups which had been persecuted in the Holocaust, such as Romany Travellers.
  - She had recently attended the International Association for Chaplains in Higher Education World Conference. Among the interesting reflections that had emerged out of this event was that faith group structures might not be speaking very well with young people. Such groups needed to think more widely about how to engage younger generations on issues of religious literacy. She wanted to address these points in DFBF's youth group.
15. Dr Crabtree said that, through engagement with the conference organisers, IFN had arranged for an Inter Faith Week flyer to be included in all the conference bags at that conference as a way of encouraging Inter Faith Week on campuses.

*Exeter Interfaith and Belief Group (EIBG)*

16. Dr Hall said that:
- EIBG had recently begun meeting again in a hybrid format. The last meeting it had organised had consisted of four people sharing their stories of community involvement in Exeter. He thought that this probably echoed the experience of other inter faith groups because many people involved in inter faith activity were also involved in wider community initiatives. It had been very inspiring to hear how different groups were helping local communities.
  - They had also had discussions about faith and voluntary caring. Somebody from Devon Carers had come to discuss this with the group. The participants had discussed who they thought were inspiring teachers from their own religions.
  - EIBG had talked about spirituality in a couple of meetings and reflected on the pandemic experience. They wanted to pick up on some of the positives from the extreme experience of having not been able to meet and adapting to new ways of interacting.

- When the group first started with hybrid meetings, they had microphones which weren't in the right place to pick up the sound. They have learnt from these experiences and now all participants can hear and see everyone properly.

*Plymouth Centre for Faiths and Cultural Diversity Inter Faith Dialogue Group (PCFCD)\**

*\*Note: The inter faith group within the PCFCD is the body in membership of IFN*

17. Ms Anna Kelly said that:

- The position of the group had changed over the past 20 years; it was now centred on what might be called the Jonathan Sacks' model of face-to-face and side-by-side. They had spent many years doing the face-to-face work by meeting regularly until their director retired four years ago. Due to a lack of funding and resources, he had not been replaced by the local authority. They had struggled since then to revitalise and develop this community building aspect of their work. However, it was from this face-to-face aspect of their work that they had developed their side-by-side work. This is what enabled the establishment of the centre 20 years ago and it continued to sustain current inter faith work and community bridge building. They remained very mindful of the urgent need to revisit the face-to-face dimension with new people and groups in the city, but finding funding to lead this has been very difficult.
- They also needed more people to get involved in leading this side of their community work – people who had the experience and understanding to facilitate it. This more formal inter faith work remained an important challenge and task for the future. They needed new Centre speakers; people who recognised and understood how vital this dialogue and understanding was for the future well-being of everyone.
- Centre staff wanted to get out into the community and identify individuals from different faiths who could be introduced to the PCFCD for potential training. Any help would be greatly appreciated.
- The centre had very dedicated part-time office staff who did an amazing job in coordinating what is now their major focus.
- The small team of trustees were committed to the work of the centre and were drawn from faith communities and the local authority. The challenging and rewarding inter faith dialogues that the group have engaged in mean that they can now work with local communities to recruit speakers to go into schools and facilitate inter faith discussion.
- PCFCD had carried out over 300 school visits a year prior to the pandemic, which was a big achievement for a small charity. They had also arranged school visits to local places of worship.
- PCFCD had been instrumental in setting up what is now known as the Plymouth Council of Faiths which had a prominent voice at civic events such as Remembrance Sunday.

18. Dr Hall asked the position on Plymouth Council of Faiths as he had heard that its chair had recently stood down. Dr Crabtree replied that IFN had been in contact with PCF recently. It was still active.

*Somerset Diverse Communities (SDC)*

19. Ms Janine Evans said that:

- Somerset had just begun their inter faith journey as a county. Somerset diverse Communities had recently received a grant from Somerset Council to start bringing groups together. They were attempting to bring them all together under one umbrella so that they could easily be found and could support each other and work together.
- The project had received funding to compile an inter faith registry. Like DFBB, they had spent a lot of time thinking about how to do this without breaking GDPR rules.
- SDC was in the process of launching an inter faith and belief network website for Somerset which would link faith communities and have a calendar of significant religious festivals.
- It had been involved with St Mary's Hospice in some webinars exploring various ways that carers and palliative care providers could assist people of differing faith and belief groups to have a dignified end of life. This thread of work was also evident in work SDC had done in Yeovil on burial grounds.
- SDC also planned to bring people of different faith and belief groups together in different areas around Somerset and to have tree planting events. Many of the saplings would be provided by Exmoor Coast Project. She would be organising presentations about the environment and faith and belief at these events.
- In a different role, she had helped bring groups of people in Somerset together for intercultural dialogue. She was also working on an English classes programme for women. The idea for that had emerged when she had met with the Islamic community of Glastonbury. Their members were predominantly from a Turkish background. The women in this community had no opportunity for conversational English and had been looking for ways to reach out. She hoped to facilitate this by hosting conversational events over a cup of tea or through picnics at the park. It would also give the opportunity to enable the women to learn more about the faiths of other people in the area.

20. Ms Kelly said that in Plymouth they had planted trees on behalf of the inter faith group at Plymouth University where there is a small park. They had also been invited to plant trees to mark Holocaust Memorial Day.

21. Ms Nash said that DFBB had done some tree planting at both the Exeter University campuses. They have tied that in with the Jewish New Year for Trees. There was therefore a faith element to that. She wondered if Somerset could work alongside a specific community to host such an event.

22. Minister Moore-Cullen suggested contacting the agricultural college at Cannington which might be able to assist with tree planting.

## *Swindon Interfaith Group*

23. Mrs Jo Backus said that:

- For Inter Faith Week each year, the group organised a pilgrimage around the faith spaces around Swindon. Last year's event had started at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the walk had been just under four and a half miles. She was unable to attend the walk but knew that it was well attended. The walk between the faith spaces provided ample opportunity for dialogue along the way, as well as healthy exercise.
- More recently, the group had hosted a committee meeting which had included a presentation from the lead chaplain of the Great Western Hospital. He had talked about his role in caring for the hospital's inter faith prayer room and the hope that some funding would be made available to refurbish it and bring it to a contemporary standard.
- At the same meeting, the group had spoken about plans for their future events.
- SIG had a link with some local community gardens run for therapeutic benefit [TWIG] and had helped develop a faith garden and would be involved in some further activities with that.
- SIG was making contacts with schools to help young people and teachers to explore faith in the educational context. Through the process of contacting schools, she had been contacted by a GCSE pupil who wanted to do a presentation on Buddhism for his class and she had been asked some very intelligent questions about her faith.
- It might also become more involved in supporting Swindon SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education) which was responsible for the religious curriculum used in schools across the locality.
- SIG were also planning some future activities for Inter Faith Week which included an important roundtable discussion which would likely be on the topic of peace and reconciliation.

24. Dr Crabtree noted SIG's regular use of social media which showed what the group was doing.

## *Torbay Faith and Belief Forum (TFBF)*

25. Minister Moore-Cullen said that:

- This was her first attendance at one of these meetings. She was a Spiritualists' National Union Minister. On the inter faith front, she had helped re-opened this group after some previous key people had retired or moved away.
- Restarting the group had meant pretty much starting from scratch. They had used some of the group's previous contacts and organised events every two months. The meetings were now quarterly and there would also be a special meeting for Inter Faith Week with two speakers. Planned topics of discussion included: Jewish mysticism; Humanist belief and non-belief in Torbay; and celebrating diversity.
- It had had to set up a few processes such as those linked to GDPR. Everyone who was on their information list had agreed to let the group have their details.
- TFBF was part of the Devon Faith and Belief Forum so its programme was put on to DFBB's website.

- TFBF was hoping to apply for some funding for a local community group which would mean that it could create a video from a local discussion. It was thinking of possibly using a Romany speaker who would talk in her native tongue, which was a dying language.
26. Dr Crabtree said that it was good to hear how Torbay Faith and Belief Forum was fully operational and moving forwards once again.

### **Agenda Item 3: Update on IFN News**

27. Mr Ashley Beck said that IFN's work during the pandemic had involved regular sharing of a large amount of information: about Covid-19 itself and responding to that; the response of faith and inter faith groups to the pandemic; and Government and sector advice on matters such as health precautions; worship; information on funerals; and burial rites. Part of keeping people in touch during that period involved Zoom meetings with local groups as people really valued the opportunity to come together and talk, albeit virtually.
28. IFN had also focused in that period on helping inter faith groups learn how to use digital technology. It had held a couple of webinars and meetings on how to use digital platforms such as Zoom and also initiated on request surgery sessions for people wanting assistance on particular aspects of digital communications. Those surgeries were still available if any groups wished to take advantage of them.
29. Inter Faith Week had continued in 2020 but in virtual form except for a small number of schools, hospices and hospitals that were open. In 2021, Inter Faith Week had seen a lot more in-person activities, but also continuation of online events. The numbers of organisations taking part had gone back up to pre-pandemic levels and numbers of activities were at the highest ever level (by a small margin).
30. IFN had also created, for use by the time of the Week, some school assembly materials on inter faith activity to complement the primary and secondary school classroom activities that IFN had published previously. These were in video format, in response to feedback from teachers.
31. IFN had recently published a biennial report. It gave a very good flavour of all the activities that IFN had been engaged in over the pandemic years. It could be accessed on IFN's website and had also been sent to all members and non-members.
32. Since the last South West Link meeting IFN had organised two national meetings. The first of these had focused on looking at how groups had responded to the pandemic, and the second, on Working in Partnership for the Common Good. IFN had also begun a piece of work looking at women's local inter faith activity. One of IFN's project officers had been in touch with local groups around the UK. A report would be produced in due course.



## **Agenda Item 5: Discussion of issues of common interest and concern**

33. Dr Crabtree, in the chair, asked the group if there were any topics that the group particularly wanted to talk about in the remaining minutes of the meeting. It was decided to discuss (i) the continuing issue of hate crime; (ii) debates surrounding applications for membership; and (iii) how to involve young people in inter faith activity.

### *Hate Crime*

34. Dr Crabtree said that hate crime may not be experienced to the same degree in every area, but the most recently released crime figures showed that religiously and racially motivated hate crime was on the rise. Many inter faith groups were likely, at some point, to find themselves supporting people who had experienced hate incidents. Groups could encourage their members to report possible hate crime to the relevant bodies.
35. Ms Kelly said that she did not think that racial discrimination was a significant issue in the Plymouth area. They had a delegated individual in the local police whom they could call instantly if there were any issues, but this had not come up yet.
36. Mr Mazidian similarly said that from his experience there hadn't been a significant issue of hate crime in the Bristol area.
37. Councillor Aditya said that if BMFF had any issues, there was SARI, an organisation which was funded by the police and which aimed to tackle inequalities. They handled the hate crime issue and the Police Scrutiny Panel always highlighted if there were any hate crime issues.
38. Dr Hall said that hate crime was an issue in the Devon area. He highlighted the example of the recent shootings in Plymouth where a young man had killed his mother and five others. They had also seen vandalism to the local synagogue in Exeter and he had witnessed abuse of local Russian children following the outbreak of the Ukraine war. He emphasised that hate crime was something of which inter faith groups should always be aware and that it was important to ensure that people knew how to respond effectively.
39. Ms Evans said that there had been no issues related to hate crime in her short time of being involved with Torbay Faith and Belief Forum.
40. Mrs Backus said that there had been a spate of robberies at the Hindu temple in Swindon and SIG had sent a message of support to the Hindu community.
41. Dr Crabtree said that messages of solidarity and other forms of assistance helped to make those affected by hate crime feel supported at such times. Even if a group had never yet needed to do this, it was important to think in advance about what they would do if they had to step in and support others. IFN was in the process of updating a document called *Looking After One Another: the Safety*

*and Security of Our Faith Communities*. That document contained a number of useful pointers.

42. She also highlighted the Home Office's Security of Places of Worship scheme which provided grants to help places of worship with the cost of relevant security measures.
43. Ms Evans said that a Muslim lady from Glastonbury had recently told her that there were a number of children who were being bullied because of their faith. She wanted to know what support was provided to schools to help them deal with this issue. Dr Crabtree said that there was online guidance provided by a number of bodies, including a useful faith related resource provided by NSPCC who had produced a good resource on faith-based bullying. IFN had also created some relevant material in conjunction with Kidscape.
44. Dr Hall said that faith communities had been very supportive in the Plymouth area, following the shootings. He thought that some incidents such as vandalism may not be thought of by the perpetrators as hate crime, but they can be very distressing for people of faith.

#### *Issues Surrounding Membership*

45. Dr Hall said that DFBF wanted to make to ensure that as many different faiths and beliefs as possible would be able to join the organisation. Hitherto, its rules had said that people should be affiliated to a traditional group and should indicate that on their application. It had just changed its rules so as to be able to admit people who were unaffiliated to a particular religious tradition. He thought that it was important to know something about the new members and a little bit about why they wanted to engage in inter faith issues. They needed to show that they were committed to the aims and beliefs of the Forum.
46. Dr Crabtree commented that when local inter faith organisations applied to be members of IFN, one of the things that they were required to demonstrate was that they had genuine ownership by different communities. She noted that local inter faith bodies varied in their own patterns of membership - sometimes offering different levels of membership. One question that continued to provoke discussion and some concern about best ways forward was how to handle membership/participation in a context where that was handled in terms of faith traditions, were a grouping sees itself as part of a particular faith community but is perceived by some others as not part of it.
47. Dr Hall said that he was aware of the kind of situation described by Dr Crabtree. DFBF had not wished to define membership very tightly; they just wanted to make it easier for people to get involved.

#### *Involving Young People*

48. Mr Mazidian thought that one of the best ways to involve young people was to get in contact with schools and universities. Dr Crabtree said that Inter Faith Week could be a very helpful time for that kind of interaction. She highlighted the

example of York Interfaith Group which had organised an event in conjunction with York University where they had both students and university staff speaking. This had also happened in other areas such as Cheltenham.

49. Ms Evans said that she saw importance in the work of inter school collaborations which involved schools coming together to hold events, team-building exercises and projects. They had held many successful events like this in Somerset.
50. Dr Crabtree drew attention to the existence of the School Linking Network and the Faith and Belief Forum which had organised a number of inter school events.
51. Dr Hall said that many inter faith groups in the South West were involved with schools. In Exeter, for example, they regularly collaborated with schools to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day.
52. Mrs Backus said that there had been a very interesting seminar by a group of teachers and pupils under the banner of 'inter faith encounters'. This was a great model of engaging both teachers and young people in an inter faith context. It also involved the local SACRE and local inter faith groups.
53. Dr Crabtree said:
  - An interesting grant scheme had been advertised recently through RE Online. Grants of £1,000 were being made available for projects that fitted their aims.
  - She hoped groups would prompt their local schools and SACREs to pick up Inter Faith Week since it was an increasingly important platform to get new people engaged.
  - Groups might also wish to consider whether there were companies in their area they thought might be interested to support an Inter Faith Week event.
54. Ms Kelly thought that people might be interested to know that PCFCD had been in touch with the Lord Lieutenant of Devon to invite him to its Inter Faith Week event, and hopefully to bring a message from The Queen regarding inter faith. She was hoping that they would receive a letter back from him saying that he would support the Week. Dr Crabtree said that perhaps they could encourage him further by noting that around the country, there are increasing numbers of Lord/Lady Lieutenants and Deputy Lieutenants playing a key role in inter faith events.
55. Dr Hall thanked IFN for organising and facilitating this meeting. He wanted to know more about IFN's ongoing position of acting as a supportive umbrella work for the region. Dr Crabtree said that she hoped that this could continue, albeit not in the same extensive way that had been possible when the Regional Faith Forums had had Government support (which had ended in 2011 following removal of the regional governance structures). IFN had hoped to see continuation of that funding but it had not been continued. She hoped that Government would come again to see the significance of regional patterns of engagement.

56. Dr Crabtree thanked everybody for their contributions and for attending the meeting. She explained that IFN would send a draft minute of the meeting. The meeting was then drawn to a close.

22 June 2023