

THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK

Note of Link Meeting for Local Inter Faith Groups in Kent

at 10.30am on Thursday 27 February 2020

at Maidstone Community Support Centre,
39-48 Marsham Street, Maidstone, Kent, ME14 1HH

Present: Ms Serine Annan-Veitch; the Revd Beth Atkins; Ms Lynne Broadbent; Mr John Caruana; Ms Debra Exall; Mr Faran Forghani; Mr David Grant; the Revd Ted Hurst; the Revd Richard Martin; the Revd Andrew McClellan (for Agenda Items 5 to close of meeting); Dr Sinan Rawi; Mr Mike Stygal; Ms Pam Warner; Mr Chris Woodward; the Revd Trevor Wyatt (for Agenda Items 1 to 3); Mrs Nicky Younosi; Mrs Elaine Yourtchi; and Mr Farzin Yourtchi.

In attendance: Dr Harriet Crabtree (Chair); Mr Ashley Beck; and Ms Ruth Foster (Inter Faith Network for the UK).

By agreement, Agenda Item 5 was taken ahead of Agenda Item 3. The minute reflects the changed order.

Agenda Item 1: Welcome and introduction

1. Dr Harriet Crabtree welcomed those present. She explained that IFN held local inter faith practitioner days for groups from all around the UK (the next one was in Reading on 24 March) and also, from time to time smaller meetings such as this one. Local inter faith work was enormously important - particularly in these challenging times.
2. A brief period of silent reflection was held, bearing in mind everyone working for good inter faith relations around the world.
3. Dr Crabtree explained that the meeting would be recorded and the tape wiped after the minutes had been finalised. Participants would have a chance to see the minutes in draft. Photographs would be taken during the meeting. If anyone had concerns, they were asked to raise these. None were raised.

Agenda Item 2: Brief participant introductions

4. Those present introduced themselves briefly.

Agenda Item 5: Inter Faith Week with presentation from Kent County Council

5. Ms Serine Annan-Veitch said that inter faith work was viewed as important for the Council for various reasons, including supporting community cohesion and as part of meeting its Public Sector Equality Duty responsibilities, the Council viewed it as important to be engaged with different faith communities. Inter faith work helped the Council to have dialogue with faith communities which can better influence our formal and informal consultation processes.

6. The majority of work, like the Inter Faith Week 'diverse open doors' (see below at Para 7), was being done by faith communities and the Council was supporting it. It was also working with the SACRE and Kent Equality Cohesion Council. In Inter Faith Week 2017 the Council had hosted a meeting to look at its role in community focused inter faith work and to discuss inter faith engagement in Kent. Kent was a very large county and the demography of different areas varied. Some of the areas were very well served and supported by inter faith work. The Council had developed a website that listed groups carrying out inter faith activity in the county. This received its greatest use to date around October and November, linked to Inter Faith Week.
7. During Inter Faith Week 2018 the Council had supported a programme of 'open door days' across the county. This was based on the Diverse Open Doors Day programme in Bristol and open door days in Birmingham. Also, Kent County Council had hosted a 'narratives of faith' event for members of the audience to share their experiences of faith. IFN Co-Chair Jatinder Singh Birdi had been the key speaker at this event. In 2019 the diverse open doors days had been expanded to include other places of worship and a large event was hosted by Kent Equality Cohesion Council for Guru Nanak's 550th Birth Anniversary. A faith 'human library' event had been planned but had to be rescheduled as it turned out that the term was trademarked.
8. Ms Debra Exall spoke about the question of who, in Kent, was interested by faith and engaged in inter faith activity. It was actually quite a small number of people, although there was particular interest in faith communities that are not Christian. To raise awareness, the Council was targeting staff in the public sector and schools with information about diverse open doors days, as well as the general public.
9. She noted how much she had personally learned from engaging in Inter Faith Week events, especially about the commonalities and similar themes between faiths. Feedback on Inter Faith Week 2019 had been that planning for the Week needed to begin much earlier. It had also pointed to a question about when it is best to open doors of places of worship – during the week (best for staff) or the weekend (best for the general public). A meeting had already taken place to discuss Inter Faith Week 2020. A paper would be brought to the County Council in October 2020 to update the Councillors on the inter faith work taking place and to publicise the work planned to take place during Inter Faith Week.
10. Inter Faith Week was very valuable but of course inter faith work needed to take place year-round. The Council had to date focused more on raising awareness of individual faiths than on the coming together of different faiths but would be looking at this. It was working with partners to plan new events. A briefing on Antisemitism and Islamophobia was being organised for County Councillors.
11. Ms Annan-Veitch added, in response to a question, that only those who had been involved in diverse open doors days had been invited to the Inter Faith Week 2020 planning meeting but others would be welcome to future meetings.
12. Mr Faran Forghani said that Inter Faith Week events in Medway were organised by MIFA rather than Medway Council. However, the Council used to

host a day of prayer observation at its offices every year during Inter Faith Week, except this year. MIFA's Inter Faith Week, and other, events were publicised by the different faith communities advertising them on their own social media pages.

13. Ms Nicky Younosi said that Ms Exall had attended a Maidstone Inter-Faith Network meeting. This was very welcome. The Borough Council had not yet engaged.
14. Ms Annan-Veitch commented that inter faith groups could use Council priorities, such as the environment, to build a connection. There was opportunity for such a theme to unify the work of the Council and of inter faith groups during Inter Faith Week. This had been mentioned at the previous meeting between the Council and inter faith groups.
15. Dr Crabtree said that Inter Faith Week nationally did not have a theme each year; it operated just with its three aims [<https://www.interfaithweek.org/about>]. This was because participating bodies usually liked to choose the focus of their events. Locally, however, agreeing themes could be helpful. Inter Faith Week 2020 would be taking place at the same time as the COP26 conference in Glasgow and this might well encourage bodies to hold environment linked events and projects.
16. Ms Lynne Broadbent of CANDIFA spoke about its Inter Faith Week activities, including a seminar in collaboration with Kent University on the Environment, where speakers from CANDIFA's faith and belief communities, students and staff, spoke about their perspectives on and responsibilities towards the environment; a woodland walk with poems and readings about trees; and a chanting event involving five different faith communities (hosted after Inter Faith Week due to issues with venues). Mr Forghani of Medway Inter Faith Action provided an example of a day of events relating to the spiritual approach to environmental issues that had taken place in 2019.
17. Revd Wyatt said that BIF was working with Bexley Council and hoped to host an Inter Faith Week celebration evening on Thursday 12 November in the Council chambers to celebrate the work of faith groups throughout the Borough. This would include awards being handed out to faith groups for community projects. The Lord Lieutenant of London and Bexley's MPs had been invited.
18. Dr Crabtree thanked Ms Annan-Veitch and Ms Exall for their presentation. Kent County Council's work on this area was significant. It was one of relatively few councils which had engaged in such a thoroughgoing way. Its Inter Faith Week programme support had been creative and high profile.

Agenda Item 3: Sharing of news

19. There was a round table sharing of news and information about groups represented. The contributions are listed here in alphabetical order of the name of the bodies. The listed points relating to each reflect those made in the reports and also in response to questions.

Bexley Interfaith Forum

20. The Revd Trevor Wyatt spoke about the Bexley Inter Faith Forum (BIF), of which he is Chair.

- BIF has been running for approximately three years.
- It has an agreed constitution but is not currently registered as a charity.
- It aims to reach out to all faith groups throughout the London Borough of Bexley.
- It meets quarterly, holding its meetings at different places of worship.
- It tries to hold events across the borough and, at its meetings, to enable all the different groups to have an opportunity to share their thoughts and views about a chosen topic. With so many different faith groups it can be challenging to fit every contribution in!
- The Chair has recently been encouraging the establishment of a steering group with two representatives from each faith community.
- BIF has a website. [<https://bexleyinterfaithforum.org/>]
- It is currently considering whether to hold a peace walk but that depends on practicability and how much support there is for the idea.
- BIF was recently awarded £500 for its work in Bexley as part of the Faith and Belief Forum's London Interfaith Awards scheme.
- Bexley Council has funded Bexley Interfaith Forum's website and inter faith awards event previously and will do so again this year. The Chief Executive of the Council and the leader of the Council are very committed to trying to build good inter faith relations.

Bromley Three Faiths Group

21. Revd Andrew McClellan spoke about the Bromley Three Faiths Group (B3FG).

- B3FG has existed for about three years.
- Participants are from the three Abrahamic faiths and this is reflected in the events and agenda of the Forum.
- All meetings of the Forum at present take place in Bromley town. It is focused on this area to help allow interpersonal relationships to flourish.
- The Forum is centred around laypeople at the Abrahamic places of worship in the area.
- Its streams of activity include a pastoral stream focused on needs of refugees in the bordering borough of Lewisham (as Bromley Council has not accepted refugees for settlement).
- Individual congregations within Bromley have been directly invited to events held at places of worship of the other faiths involved.
- BTFF has hosted a peace walk, a 'piece of cake' initiative and a mothers' and toddlers' group. Cake related activities are always very popular!
- The biggest and most popular events that take place are theological discussion evenings every 6 to 8 weeks. The last event had 55 people in attendance. People were welcome to invite friends.
- The congregations involved in B3FG are interested in making their places of worship 'eco-friendly'. The Steering Group has been looking at online material about creating 'eco' synagogues, mosques and churches. Once this is agreed upon the information will be sent to members of the Forum.

- The Steering Group has members from the three Abrahamic faiths – which are the three main ones in Bromley – and the theological discussions are based on these faiths. However, anyone is welcome to attend the Forum – including those of no faith.
- The group is still discussing its written constitution and the question of how/whether people of other faiths might take part is open for future consideration.

Canterbury and District Inter Faith Action (CANDIFA)

22. Ms Lynne Broadbent (Chair), Mr Mike Stygal and Dr Sinan Rawi spoke about Canterbury and District Inter Faith Action (CANDIFA).

- CANDIFA has been running for 20 years.
- It is a small organisation, made up of seven faith groups.
- It is actively attempting to get more people involved.
- It has a 'Council' that meets monthly and plans events and also a 'Canterbury Friends' group that meets once a year at the AGM.
- It has set up a Facebook account [<https://www.facebook.com/Candifa123/>] and a website is being developed.
- CANDIFA hosts a monthly event with readings and music from world faiths and cultures. This goes back to an event that was originally organised by one of the founding members.
- During Inter Faith Week CANDIFA hosted an art exhibition, a chanting event, a walk in the woods to celebrate the sacredness of trees, and an event at the university.
- Individual members have hosted other events which are independent of CANDIFA. Examples include solidarity prayers held by the Christian and Muslim communities and a peace walk from Ramsgate to Canterbury developed by the Krishna Consciousness member of the group.
- It hopes to get the Churches more involved in Inter Faith Week in the future and also to step up engagement with schools.
- Canterbury Mosque (represented by CANDIFA founder member Dr Sinan Rawi) has a good and active relationship with it.

Maidstone Inter-Faith Network

23. Mr David Grant (Secretary), Ms Pam Warner and Ms Nicky Younosi (Chair) spoke about the Maidstone Inter-Faith Network (MIFN).

- MIFN was set up 2 years ago.
- A constitution was agreed by it in June and a structure is in place to build upon that.
- It has launched a website [<https://www.mifn.org.uk/>].
- Its meetings take place at different places of worship. Meetings open with presentations from members about their own faiths to the rest of the group.
- Most meetings thus far have been internal and focusing on the group's development and management. However, MIFN is reaching into the community gradually through such routes as the connections of individual members, for example through chaplaincy work, and there is a desire to move towards being an action-orientated group.

- MIFN's main reach has been into schools. For example, in Inter Faith Week it went into a number of secondary schools. It has also hosted a competition for primary schools. It has mostly made contact with schools through head teachers, deputy heads or heads of RE. It has also received referrals that have been passed on by Medway Inter Faith Action.
- MIFN was represented at the Maidstone Mela.
- It worked with Maidstone Library during Inter Faith Week on a special event, as well as with Maidstone Museums.
- It has been approached by local radio to talk about its inter faith programmes.
- Maidstone Community Police are supportive of MIFN's work.

Medway Inter Faith Action

24. The Revd Beth Atkins, Mr John Caruana (Secretary), and Mr Faran Forghani (Executive Member) spoke about Medway Inter Faith Action (MIFA).

- MIFA began in 1997.
- It meets monthly in Medway Council offices. The Council does not charge it for use of the room.
- At each meeting, five speakers from faith and non-faith backgrounds are invited to speak on a chosen theme.
- MIFA currently has stronger meeting attendance from some groups than others; some groups are very hospitable when visited but less inclined to come to meetings at other locations.
- Prayers are said together on Remembrance Day, strengthening the link between faiths in the area.
- MIFA hosts an annual 3km walk for peace. This has three or four stops at different places of worship and the war memorial in Chatham. Other stops have included a mosque, a Unitarian church and a synagogue. The walk ends in Rochester outside of the cathedral where entertainment is provided. Last time this was provided by the Bulgarian, Chinese and Krishna Consciousness groups. Emphasis is placed on making the event a celebration.
- The hosting of the walk by different places of worship such as Chatham Synagogue is very important.
- MIFA has applied for funding for the first time to pay for expenses and publicity relating to the walk for peace.

25. In subsequent conversation it was noted that patterns of involvement in local inter faith bodies differed. Mr Wyatt commented on what he called the 'home/away problem'. A number of others present had also experienced the challenge that members of faith communities can be more inclined to participate when on 'home' turf in their own place of worship rather than 'away' at another place of worship. Mr Wyatt was working to establish a steering group for Bexley Interfaith Forum with up to two representatives from each faith or religion. It was hoped that this might help address this issue.

26. Dr Crabtree said that, based on comments from local inter faith groups, it seemed sometimes to be the case that relationships between places of worship of the same faith in a locality could affect their willingness to field

representatives to the local inter faith initiative. She noted that Inter Faith Week provided a helpful opportunity for involvement together in a public context of groups within faith communities which might not normally engage with each other.

27. Ms Atkins noted that Kent Community Foundation managed different streams of funding for groups in Kent. This was not for the promotion of religious or political purposes and suggested that, if applying, groups should highlight that they were doing so for work promoting community cohesion and wellbeing or social interaction.

North Kent Council for Inter-Faith Relations

28. The Revd Richard Martin spoke about North Kent Council for Inter-Faith Relations (NKCIFR).

- NKCIFR was originally established in the 1980s but its activity level has varied over the years.
- It has recently recruited members from the Sikh community which is particularly important in the area.
- It has begun outreach through hosting stalls at different events such as a Gravesend Council event on community cohesion around food and a festival at the local gurdwara.
- The Kent Equality Cohesion Council has asked the NKCIFR to attend their events – often after tragedies. It rarely asks, however, about what the group itself is doing during the year.
- NKCIFR seeks to reflect the religious diversity of the area – and also to enable people to be aware of the diversity of belief and practice within traditions. The group has found the Diversity Game very helpful for this. Also, time is included in meetings for members to share their faith story.
- It hosted a walk during Inter Faith Week that included litter picking.
- Hospitality involving food is popular: the langar meal, iftar meal and pancake day event have proven popular. However, it has found that some groups are happier to offer hospitality than to receive it.

Tunbridge Wells Inter Faith Group

29. Mr Chris Woodward (Chair) and Ms Elaine Yourtchi spoke about the emerging Tunbridge Wells Inter Faith Group (TWIFG).

- TWIFG is an emerging group that hopes to maintain dialogue and build local fellowship.
- TWIFG meets every two months and is currently trying to build its presence in the area, with lunchtime meetings.
- It currently has about 8 members, with active involvement from Anglicans, Baha'is, Catholics, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), Jews, and Quakers. There has also been expression of interest from some Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims.
- Meetings have thus far taken place at Quaker and LDS premises.
- Heritage Open Days have been used as an opportunity to make connections with local places of worship.

- It has established a Facebook group.
 - TWIFG has contacted Borough Council cabinet members. These have not, to date, shown interest but they will be kept up to date on its development;
 - It has a good working relationship the MP for Tunbridge Wells who is aware of the group.
 - One question under discussion is whether the body should remain focused just on Tunbridge Wells or aim to cover all of West Kent (which might include Tonbridge and Sevenoaks).
30. The issue of local inter faith bodies' geographical coverage was discussed briefly. Ms Broadbent said that representation of different religious groups in CANDIFA is drawn from an area wider than Canterbury itself, which was reflected in the 'and District' part of its name. Dr Crabtree said that there were other instances of that, for example 'Hastings and District Interfaith Forum' which covered both Hastings and Rother. Ms Younosi from Maidstone Inter-Faith Network said that members took Maidstone to refer to the borough rather than just the town.
31. Dr Crabtree commented on the importance of development of local inter faith organisations in areas which were not as religiously diverse as some of the big multi faith towns and cities. They provided a 'nucleus' for inter faith activity and learning.
32. Dr Crabtree noted that there is no fixed model for local inter faith organisations. Their make-up and structure was likely to reflect a number of factors such as pattern of religious diversity in their area. Examples of constitutions were available from the Inter Faith Network, its publication *The Local Inter Faith Guide* was also helpful [<https://www.interfaith.org.uk/resources/the-local-inter-faith-guide-faith-community-co-operation-in-action-second-e>]. A new edition of the latter was currently being produced.

Agenda Item 4: Experiences and views of places of worship 'open door' days

33. Dr Crabtree said that there was a section on the inter faith network website about open door days. [<https://www.interfaith.org.uk/resources/open-door-days>] and IFN was looking at doing some further work on this topic. It would be helpful to hear the reflections and experiences of the meeting, including positive aspects and challenges. In discussion, the following points were made by individual participants:
- The openness of the host community is very important, as is members' explaining their practice well. Talks and panels can be useful.
 - It can sometimes be hard to get people to ask questions, especially if they are fearful of causing offence. People need to understand that the hosts are there to answer to the best of their ability and that they welcome questions.
 - People must have sufficient training or encouragement to be able to open their doors, be safe and take more challenging questions.
 - The best visits to other places of worship are where there are lots of people present to welcome visitors and people are included in the place of worship's celebration and invited to share food.

- Providing food that meets everyone's dietary requirements can be complicated.
 - Some smaller communities such as Baha'is and Zoroastrians may not have places of worship that can be visited. Pagans also do not usually have structures that can be visited.
34. Dr Crabtree spoke of her visit to Wellingborough during Inter Faith Week 2019 where the Quaker meeting house had provided opportunities for the public also to meet and talk with Baha'is and Buddhists during the open door day.

Agenda Item 6: Topical issues and concerns

35. A number of topics were addressed.
[Note: items asterisked were discussed briefly under two other Agenda Items but have been minuted here for ease of reference.]
- a) Hate crime and racism
36. Mr Caruana said that Medway's Holocaust Memorial Day event addressed these themes. It included local schools, people from different faiths and local police officers.
37. Mr Stygal said that when large acts of hate crime or terrorism took place, the statements made by IFN's Co-Chairs and Faith Communities Forum Moderators are particularly useful. They were posted on both Facebook and Twitter.
38. Mr Grant gave the example of Maidstone Inter-Faith Network's work with schools. It was not only an issue of being reactive and responding to events but also of getting involved early with challenging opinions and beliefs that can lead to hate.
39. Dr Crabtree flagged up the Inter Faith Network's 'Looking After One Another' resource from 2017 [<https://www.interfaith.org.uk/resources/looking-after-one-another-the-safety-and-security-of-our-faith-communities-2017>]. This was developed by IFN with Government, the Crown Prosecution Service, the National Police Chiefs Council and the National Fire Chiefs Council. Ms Rashmi Bhopla, Head of Hate Crime Policy at the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government was due to be speaking at the Reading event for local inter faith practitioners on 24 March. She added that it was important for groups to 'put themselves on the radar' of local authorities so that the latter knew that the local inter faith group could be helpful in certain contexts such as in the wake of attacks on places of worship.
40. Ms Annan-Veitch noted that the Council kept inter faith work and Prevent work separate.
41. Mr Forghani said that Medway Inter Faith Action worked closely with Medway Police. The police had noted the importance of inter faith work in the community in combating hate crime and had given £600 towards the group's work. The Community Security Trust was coming to speak to one of the group's meetings.

42. Dr Crabtree noted that there was a Home Office grant scheme for faith communities to strengthen the security of their places of worship [<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/places-of-worship-security-funding-scheme>] and also a training scheme. She spoke of the importance of local inter faith groups in expressing solidarity. Faith groups appreciated the visible support of others - for example individuals standing outside places of worship in the aftermath of an incident. There was a significant power in photographs and statements made after an attack, as there is a consolation in this expression of solidarity. Some local inter faith groups had ongoing strong relationships with their local police force. There was, of course, a wider emergency response that went beyond policing to emergencies such as flooding and pandemics. The County Council and local authorities were usually the best point of contact for emergency response matters.

b) Enabling dialogues on challenging issues

43. Mr McClellan said that the topic of forgiveness had been chosen by the Bromley Three Faiths Group for an event held around Holocaust Memorial Day. This topic had been challenging for all present – and was perhaps particularly so from the Jewish experience given the terrible events of the Holocaust. The topic had been chosen by the three members who were planning on speaking. As the context of the Group’s meeting was friendly and trusting they had been able to approach the challenging topic safely.
44. ‘Scriptural reasoning’ was highlighted by Mr Martin as a good way to discuss potentially challenging issues in a carefully structured way.
45. Conversion was highlighted as a difficult issue by Mr Martin. It was important to clarify individual thinking and beliefs when participating in inter faith dialogue. Mr Forghoni noted that Medway Inter Faith Action had a rule that inter faith meetings were not the place for trying to convert people.
46. Dr Crabtree drew attention to the Inter Faith Network’s resource ‘Let’s Talk: Practical Pointers for Inter Faith Dialogue’. This had been developed with its member bodies and included a useful section on handling of difficult dialogues. She also noted that every member body of the Inter Faith Network agreed to the set of principles set out in its code, ‘Building good relations with people of different faiths and beliefs’ [<https://www.interfaith.org.uk/resources/building-good-relations-with-people-of-different-faiths-and-beliefs>]. This had been developed out of a year-long programme which also resulted in the publication *Mission, Dialogue and Inter-Religious Encounter*, which had been initiated in response to what the churches had called the ‘Decade of Evangelism’ in the 1990s.

c) Social Media

47. Dr Crabtree and Mr Ashley Beck talked about the usefulness of having a Facebook page – and in particular one that was an organisational page rather than a personal page or a group (which can’t be tagged or shared by others – including IFN – to make groups’ work better known). It was possible to hide or remove unsavoury comments if needed. Twitter was a useful platform to put out

pieces of news. Mr Beck asked those present to let him know if they had Twitter accounts which could be tagged during the meeting.

48. Dr Crabtree noted that a workshop on communications, including the use of social media, would be taking place at the Reading event on 24 March led by IFN staff member Madiha Hussein.

Close of the meeting

49. Attendees agreed that their contact details (as noted on a circulated sheet) could be shared with each other.
50. Representatives of groups that were not members of the Inter Faith Network were invited by Mr Beck to speak with him if they thought that their group was eligible to apply and were interested to do so. Application forms were also available to take away.
51. Dr Crabtree thanked everyone for their contributions and encouraged them to keep in touch with IFN. If there were particular issues groups would find it helpful to discuss, the IFN office was always happy to have a conversation.
52. Participants expressed their appreciation for the meeting, and in particular for Ms Ruth Foster's careful arrangements for it.
53. The meeting closed at 1pm.

24 June 2020