

THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK

Note of Link Meeting for Local Inter Faith Groups in the South West Region of England

at 2pm on Thursday 27 August 2020

by Zoom

Present: Cllr Tom Aditya (Bristol Multi-Faith Forum); Mr Waleed Ahmad (Swindon Interfaith Group); Mr Kenny Baxter (Swindon Interfaith Group); Mr Mark Behard (Bristol Inter Faith Group); The Revd Canon Dr John Hall (Devon Faith and Belief Forum/ Exeter Faith and Belief Group); Mr Andrew Judge (West Wiltshire Multi Faith Forum); Mr George Mazidian (Bristol Inter Faith Group); The Revd David Musgrave (Bath Interfaith Group); Ms Jane O'Hara (Bath Interfaith Group); Mr Ed Pawson (Devon Faith and Belief Forum/ Exeter Faith and Belief Group); Mr Tom Rutland (Somerset informal group); Fr Richard Silk (Plymouth Council of Faiths); Fr Peter Slocombe (Cheltenham Inter Faith); and Ms Rita Stephen (Cornwall Faith Forum)

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

Apologies: Faith Links (Bournemouth and Poole)

Agenda Item 1: Welcome and introduction

1. Dr Harriet Crabtree, in the chair, welcomed those present and explained various housekeeping matters.
2. Those present consented to the meeting being recorded for minuting purposes, and to screenshots being taken for possible use on social media and IFN's website and publications.
3. Dr Crabtree invited those present to introduce themselves.

Agenda Item 2: IFN and inter faith working during COVID-19

4. Dr Crabtree said that since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, IFN's work had pivoted to focus on the pandemic and helping bodies to respond well, and sharing good practice in that context. The Faith Communities Forum, for example, had been meeting monthly to enable discussion of how COVID-19 was affecting faith communities nationally and the ways that they were responding. The National and Regional Inter Faith Organisations and Educational and Academic Bodies categories had also met during the period.
5. The work of local inter faith groups was of great importance during the pandemic; it was at local level that people engaged most strongly in responding to the needs of people around them. IFN has therefore increased opportunities for local groups to come together in meetings such as this one and also webinars – such as one on communications during the pandemic – and additional regional link

meetings such as the present meeting. IFN had also been highlighting the work of local groups, such as Cornwall Faith Forum's devotional prayer activity in response to COVID.

Agenda Item 3: Local inter faith organisations' updates

6. Dr Crabtree invited representatives of local groups to give a brief introduction to the organisations that they were representing; share something of their work; and offer reflections on how COVID-19 was shaping their activity.

Bristol Multi-Faith Forum (BMFF)

7. Cllr Tom Aditya said that:
- BMFF had been started in 2004 by the City Council as a Forum for it to consult faith communities.
 - It had a link to Bristol Inter Faith Group, and its membership overlapped.
 - BMFF had been providing food to people from other parts of the world who had been stranded by COVID-19.
 - It had also been working with the NHS Trusts to support people and providing canned food.
 - BMFF was planning to hold a programme for Inter Faith Week with the Bristol NHS Trust and University Hospitals Bristol NHS Foundation Trust.
 - BMFF often worked with the Lord Mayor on civic activities.
 - BMFF also did work with its members on developing blood and organ donation.

Bristol Inter Faith Group (BIFG)

8. Mr Mark Behard said that:
- Over the months since the pandemic began, Bristol Inter Faith Group had not been communicating very actively.
 - BMFF had been more active.
 - BIFG was interested in taking forward the Inter Faith Week Buddies scheme.
 - BIFG's approach was usually more low-key and philosophically based, it focused on dialogue. BMFF focused more on action.
9. The Revd Canon Dr John Hall said that earlier in the year, before the pandemic hit, Devon Faith and Belief Forum and Exeter Faith and Belief Group had taken a group of young people to Bristol to take part in the Diverse Doors programme. The young people had gained a lot from the visit, and it would be good to know whether it was continuing in some form. Cllr Aditya said that it was hoped that it could continue. It usually took place in February, so it would depend on what the COVID rules were next February. It was good to hear that the young people had valued the experience. Dr Crabtree said that IFN had put Kent County Council in touch with Diverse Doors last year, as it had wished to explore something similar in Kent.

Cheltenham Inter Faith (CIF)

10. Fr Peter Slocombe said that:

- CIF had been involved in a few activities, including LGBT Pride.
- It had not had open meetings since the lockdown began, as some members had been reluctant to go virtual. It had, however, had Committee meetings and its AGM.
- CIF was planning a socially distanced inter faith walk for September.
- It was also reappraising what the group was for and wished to achieve, and thinking about how it might use social media in the longer term.
- CIF was also planning for Inter Faith Week, an activity which would be a joint venture with the Borough Council and the University.

Bath Interfaith Group (BIG)

11. The Revd David Musgrave said that:

- BIG was celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, and an event was planned for 25 October linked to that.
- Bath was not a very diverse city in terms of the formal communities there – the only place of worship other than Christian ones was the mosque.
- BIG was trying to build its link with the universities – universities were often more diverse than the towns or cities they were located in.
- BIG was not currently reaching outside of itself much – there was a desire to see this happening more, as there was little public recognition in the City of what ‘inter faith’ meant.
- One advantage to come from the pandemic was the adoption of technology for Committee meetings – meeting virtually was more convenient and attendance had been higher.
- Some of BIG’s meetings were open to others – Fr Slocombe had been able to join one recently.

12. Ms Jane O’Hara said that:

- BIG’s levels of activity over its past 30 years had varied. It had at various points worked with the Mayor’s Office, the Bath and North East Somerset SACRE, and local teachers.
- Under the Blair Government, BIG had had access to small grants which enabled it to carry out inter faith projects in the locality.
- BIG was well known by institutions within Bath and other faith and inter faith groups.
- The Mayor was the patron of BIG. The Mayor was elected annually. It worked with the Mayor to run a civic event each year.
- It had a loose subscription model – many regular attenders were not formally members.
- The Group had never received core funding.

13. Dr Crabtree said that the closure of the English Regional Faith Forums meant that many local groups had lost a valuable source of support. This was very true of the South West.

Cornwall Faith Forum (CFF)

14. Ms Rita Stephen said that:
- Cornwall had very small faith communities, but a very active Faith Forum.
 - CFF had been founded in 2008. Its focus was on peace, including education work, refugee support and building for peace.
 - As part of its peace focused work it was building a faith centre for Cornwall, Dor Kemmyn. Currently, Cornwall only had Christian places of worship within it.
 - The Jewish community in Cornwall was very small, and mainly Progressive. In order to get a minyan, it was necessary for the whole Jewish community to come together for one type of service. It handled this well.
 - CFF had been holding 'prayer share' events on Zoom since the pandemic began. There was no Rabbi or Imam in Cornwall, so there was no one able to officiate at religious funerals during lockdown. So CFF had explored the idea of a rabbi or an imam officiating remotely. It was a difficult situation, with people not being able to travel in to the area.
 - CFF had 40 volunteers from 7 faith communities, and they came together to support 8 refugee families in Cornwall. It was important for refugees to have support in this way, because there were so few people in Cornwall from other parts of the world.
15. Ms O'Hara asked where within the county the Forum was located. Ms Stephen said that members lived all over the county, but the field on which it was hoped to build the faith centre was just outside Truro.

Devon Faith and Belief Forum (DFBF)

16. Canon Dr Hall said that:
- DFBF had started the year in good heart.
 - It had held a very lively event to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day, which had been very well supported, including by the County Council.
 - It had also held an environmental event, planting nearly 100 trees on the edge of Dartmoor in March.
 - Young people had also travelled to Bristol in February for Diverse Doors, which they had really enjoyed. That had been the first DIFFY (Devon Inter Faith Forum for Youth) event since it had been re-formed during Inter Faith Week 2019.
 - DFBF had held an 'email meeting' in March, but had not met since. A number of members had been reluctant to try Zoom, and it was not possible to meet even as restrictions had loosened because many members were older and were shielding. Public transport was also an issue.
 - DFBF had postponed its AGM, which was now scheduled for October.
17. Dr Crabtree noted that Devon County Council had produced some excellent material online about bereavement and different faiths with the assistance of DFBF. Canon Dr Hall said that DFBF and EFBF had worked with the council closely on that.

Exeter Faith and Belief Group (EFBF)

18. Mr Ed Pawson said that:

- The situation in terms of meetings was similar to that of the Devon group.
- It was worth reflecting on why EFBF had not met. It seemed that people found it challenging to conceptualise inter faith activity online. They saw it as flourishing only where it was based on real interaction. Also, initially, EFBF had thought the lockdown would be shorter and that had also affected the decision not to meet. As lockdown had continued, members had not really found a new way of working. It would be useful to take back from the present meeting the experiences of other groups.
- EFBF had recently re-edited the 'universal peace prayers' book that had been produced for Inter Faith Week about 4 years ago. It had been well-received. It featured prayers from 12 or 13 different traditions.
- Over the past few years, EFBF had been running school workshops for GCSE students entitled 'Dying matters'. For these workshops it had brought together people from diverse faith backgrounds and those with medical expertise.
- The workshops had been successful in bringing an inter faith perspective to an issue that was in the curriculum for young people to study.

19. Ms Stephen asked if EFBF had considered continuing the school workshops via Zoom. Mr Pawson said that was a good suggestion, and he would be in touch to explore possibilities.

20. Mr Behard said that it was right to reflect on why groups had not met, and Bristol Inter Faith Group would do that too. The present meeting was the first inter faith meeting he had attended in 4-6 months.

Plymouth Council of Faiths (PCF)

21. Fr Richard Silk said that:

- A lot that had been shared by other groups resonated; the chaos of March had been very challenging.
- PCF sometimes saw itself as the conscience of the City Council. The relationship waxed and waned.
- In the past, the Council had asked PCF to organise the main Holocaust Memorial Day event in the City. However, after a few years, once this event was established and had been working well, the Council had taken it back in-house.
- Plymouth had had a UKIP-led council for a time, and the population could be fairly right-wing.
- Anglican and Catholic congregations had seen numbers fall due to COVID-19. There was concern about how to keep communities going and that some parishes might become too small to be viable.
- The smaller faith communities were struggling even more.
- The Forum had become a source of strength for faith communities.

Somerset Informal Group

22. Mr Tom Rutland said that:

- He was the equality lead for Somerset County Council, and not from a faith/belief group.
- He had been trying to get an inter faith group set up, but had been unsuccessful.
- However, his work had led to the emergence of an informal group, which had been useful.
- There were a couple of mosques in the county, as well as strong Christian traditions. There were also Pagan and Wiccan communities, especially around the Glastonbury area.
- The annual HMD event had the support of many groups and was held in a church. Somerset's Jewish community was very small, but it was supportive of the HMD event.
- The Council had worked with faith groups on COVID response, including on issues linked to death and burial.

Swindon Interfaith Group (SIG)

23. Mr Kenny Baxter said that:

- SIG had been founded around the year 1990 by a local Quaker couple.
- It was a very informal group, based around individual membership. It did not have formal representatives from any faith community.
- SIG aimed to have fixed events each year – for example, it always held a peace event on the anniversary of the September 11 2001 terror attacks. This was led by the local Muslim community (which some found very surprising).
- SIG had found the link with IFN very helpful during COVID-19 – the information and advice was really useful.
- He had a strong interest in getting SIG 'digital ready'
- Inter Faith Week in Swindon was likely to be a virtual one.

West Wiltshire Multi Faith Forum (WWMFF)

24. Mr Andrew Judge said that:

- He was a newcomer to the area and had only been in Trowbridge for 18 months. He had become involved with WWMFF early on.
- WWMFF was in a time of transition. Two members had run the group for many years; however, one had recently moved to Hong Kong and the other had stepped down.
- WWMFF had been holding Zoom meetings during the pandemic.
- Its AGM was planned for October.
- Survival had been WWMFF's main focus!
- The local council sought the advice of WWMFF on multicultural issues. However, the council's interest was more multiculturalism than inter faith.
- WWMFF had a large number of BAME members.

- WWMFF was looking at the Black Lives Matter movement, and that in the context of COVID-19. The pandemic had highlighted and exposed the divisions that were there already.
 - The group had held activities for Black History Month and International Women's Day.
 - He would be glad to hear from any other groups that had been exploring these issues.
25. Ms O'Hara said that BIFG had for many years maintained good links with the Swindon and Frome groups. The latter was no more, and her contacts were out of date. She would be glad if those present would be willing to share email addresses. Dr Crabtree said that this had been agreed at the beginning of the meeting, before Ms O'Hara joined. She drew attention also to the list of local groups on IFN's website (<https://www.interfaith.org.uk/involved/groups>), which included a contact form for nearly every group.

Agenda Item 4: Discussion of any emerging key issues/themes

26. Dr Crabtree said that about the most regularly raised issues in the course of the group presentations seemed to have been the difficulty of operating without funding and the challenges to reaching out and using Zoom in a context where some members did not feel comfortable doing so. She invited comments on these topics.

Digital reticence

27. Fr Slocombe said that the reticence to use Zoom or other technology could be overcome by some people agreeing to do something on Zoom, then encouraging others to join later. It was important to offer help to those who had concerns. But those who were happy to use it should do so to begin with.
28. Mr Baxter said that he agreed with this point. SIG had had 25 people attend its AGM via Zoom, which had been more than anticipated. They were not the same people who would have attended had it been held in person, but it was helpful to get a new audience engaged too.
29. Ms Stephen said that Zoom worked well for project meetings. However, for exploring difficult topics it felt like it was much more challenging via Zoom than it would be in person, even with a group which knew each other well. CFF was running an inter faith exploration of conflict and peace, and a future meeting would focus on Israel and Palestine. Sometimes, it was just easier to have those conversations when you could see someone's body language and see if/ how they were responding to what was being said.
30. Fr Silk said that while business was often done by video conferencing, pastoral care and individual contact were much harder to do well through those media. As a priest, not being able to visit people had been agonising at times – it was so often important to be with people in person when they were experiencing difficulties. Services could be done online, but pastoral care was different.

31. Canon Dr Hall noted that the Zoom host controls usually resided with the person paying for the account.

Funding

32. Dr Crabtree said that there were many groups that had in the past received funding, and it had initially been very challenging for groups to adapt to life without it. But groups had necessarily been developing new ways of working.
33. Ms O'Hara said that Bath Interfaith Group had only ever had project funding, never core funding. It had always relied upon volunteers. However, without younger members – including those in their 30s and 40s – the group would be likely to fizzle out in a few years. Members of the committee were therefore trying to use social media more to bring the group into contact with a wider range of people.

Agenda Item 5: Inter Faith Week

34. Dr Crabtree said that many groups in the South West were planning Inter Faith Week activities. This was an opportunity to share and discuss plans. The Buddying scheme had also been mentioned earlier and a bit more about that if people were interested. She invited discussion on Inter Faith Week.
35. Ms O'Hara said that BIG tried to hold a meeting most months, and had just successfully switched these over to Zoom. It was planning to hold an event during Inter Faith Week. Originally, this was going to be through the Spiritual Care Centre at the Royal United Hospital in a conference room there. The pandemic meant that it would need to be handled differently – perhaps also via Zoom.
36. Mr Beck said that Mr George Mazidian had shared via chat that Bristol Inter Faith Group would be making arrangements to run the Inter Faith Week Buddies scheme in Bristol. 10 people had already expressed interest in taking part. Dr Crabtree said that the Buddies scheme was conceived as something that could be done online, but it did not need to be. It could be done via telephone or even like a traditional 'pen pal' scheme. Cllr Aditya said that BMFF would also explore it.
37. Ms Stephen said that the scheme fitted well with the ethos and approach of CFF and so they were also hoping to run it. She also said that CFF wanted to reach more young people, and so it had made connection with the university and was trying to find students who could help make some animations linked to HMD, which could then be used with teenagers in schools.
38. Mr Baxter said that Swindon Interfaith Group were also thinking about how they could mark Inter Faith Week this year. In 2019, it had had a very active Week, with events on every night hosted by different faith groups. The current thinking was that something similar but held virtually would be helpful. The Buddy scheme was also of interest.

39. Fr Slocombe said that this year presented opportunities to draw on people from elsewhere in the world. Usually travel costs would prevent this, but meeting virtually opened up the scope for possible guest speakers.
40. Canon Dr Hall said that there seemed to be more polarisation in society at present, and a lot less relating. The Buddy scheme might be a very important way to help people to engage across those polarities. In the South West, for example, the figures for violent crime were up 40 percent, and hate crime figures were also up. Building relationships was vital, and modelling this could be very beneficial.
41. Fr Silk said he agreed with the previous two points. He had recently taken part in a Zoom meeting with 230 people from all over the world, so it was possible!
42. Ms Stephen thanked IFN for organising the meeting and said it had been very encouraging to hear everyone's reflections. Every small action made a difference.
43. Dr Crabtree thanked everyone for attending, and for sharing their reflections. The current times were challenging; that was said a lot at the moment – perhaps because people had run out of language to describe what felt like an indescribable situation. The world had moved from an emergency footing to a kind of doldrum world where we kept going to a point but were not able to move forward, backwards or sideways. Organisations like local inter faith groups played a very important role in being there for people, creating and maintaining connections, and encouraging people to continue to respond with courage. She wished all well with their continuing work.

5 May 2021