

THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK

Note of North East Regional Link meeting

from 2pm to 3.30pm on Monday 27 July 2020

by Zoom

Present: Kersi Fanibunda (Newcastle Council of Faiths/Newcastle Faith Leaders Group); Jacquetta Gomes (Durham University); Lesley Hillary (Newcastle Council of Faiths and Inter Faith Adviser to the Diocese of Newcastle); the Revd Chris Howson (Sunderland Interfaith Forum and Chaplain University of Sunderland); Shahda Khan (Middlesbrough Interfaith Network); Vikas Kumar (Gateshead Interfaith Forum) Any Lie (Newcastle Council of Faiths/County Durham Faiths Network); Karenza Passmore (County Durham Faiths Network and Religious Resource Centre in the North East); and Jim Robertson (North East Regional Faiths Network).

In attendance: Dr Harriet Crabtree and Dr David Hampshire (Inter Faith Network for the UK).

Agenda Item 1: Welcome and introduction

1. Dr David Hampshire welcomed participants to the meeting.
2. A time of silence was held to remember those who had sadly lost their lives as a result of Covid-19; all those groups that have been working to support those vulnerable because of it; and all working for good inter faith relations.
3. Round table introductions were made.

Agenda Item 2: IFN and COVID-19

4. Dr Hampshire ask IFN's Executive Director, Dr Harriet Crabtree, to give a short report on some of the work IFN had been doing in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.
5. Dr Harriet Crabtree said that IFN had been sharing information through online meetings and its website so that people could learn from what each other were doing. The present local inter faith link meeting was an example of that - a number at the present meeting would have been taking a lead locally, either through their individual faith groups or through their inter faith organisations. Local inter faith groups had been playing an important role in many areas, for example in relation to how their local authorities were responding to the pandemic.
6. IFN had created a Covid-19 section for its website: www.interfaith.org.uk. This included, for example: guidance from the UK Government and governments of the devolved nations; guidance from national faith communities; as well as links to some of the remarkable faith-inspired volunteer initiatives. IFN's Faith

Communities Forum - which brings together its national faith community body members – had been looking at some of the challenging issues such as reopening places of worship and handling of funerals. They had also discussed the impact on the resources of local places of worship of such factors as loss of rental income and drop in devotee gifts to temples. This had affected places large and small. The BBC had the previous day reported that Westminster Abbey was about to lay off a significant number of its staff.

7. Dr Crabtree said that of course the pandemic did not make other issues go away. There remained the continued and difficult problem of hate crime and prejudice. COVID conspiracy theories added to that.

Agenda Item 3: Sharing of news

8. Dr Hampshire invited participants to take 5 minutes each to share news of programmes and projects that they were running and any particular opportunities and challenges in the light of Covid-19.

Newcastle Council of Faiths

9. Mrs Lesley Hillary reported on Newcastle Council of Faiths, of which she is Secretary.
 - Many plans have come to a grinding halt due to the pandemic – as they have for everyone.
 - Newcastle Council of Faiths (NCF) and Newcastle Diocese (ND) have been looking at things around anti-racism in Newcastle. They had a Zoom event 2-3 weeks ago that focussed on that. This had invited speakers and questions submitted by participants in advance. That was important due to a number of complications and complex undercurrents. Mrs Hillary touched briefly on these, noting Black Lives Matter and also NCF and ND's close work with the Jewish community.)
 - Another meeting is happening tonight. NCF and ND have taken 5 sectors from the community. Speakers include the leader of Newcastle City Council and Geoff Miller, Dean of Newcastle Cathedral, who will be talking about what's happened during the pandemic, how they're coping, how Newcastle as a city is, and what tomorrow might look like.
 - They are also planning to look at the plight of Chinese Muslims. The next meeting is likely to be on 6 September on Zoom.
 - Through the Diocese there is an initiative called Voices of Faith. It has just done a video where 3 different religious leaders are asked about their experience of Covid what learning resources they have been able to tap into. (Ms Hillary noted she had sent that out that day).
 - Her colleague Karenza Passmore and she had had a conversation months ago and about something called the Learning Bus. It's a double decker bus that has been rented. It will be set up like a Hindu temple it will go to schools and other places giving children who board it a chance to experience sights, sounds, smells, tastes, of what it would be like visiting a Hindu temple. It's not possible to take the project forward until safe again. Possible it might be relevant to Inter Faith Week.

- There was an important report by a Newcastle University lecturer published a week ago about Islamophobia in Newcastle. There was a Zoom meeting about it last Wednesday night. [Ms Hillary shared a link in Chat: <https://www.tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ISLAMOPHOBIA-AND-ANTI-MUSLIM-HATRED-IN-NORTH-EAST-ENGLAND-090620.pdf>]

10. Mr Andy Lie explained that:

- He is part of both the Newcastle Council of Faiths and the County Durham Faiths Network; has past links with the North East Regional Faith Network; and is not linked into the Sunderland Faith Forum but hopes to be in due course.
- He was Chair of People to People North East before its work came to a close quite a number of years ago. Most of its work has subsequently been picked up in other ways. Its commitment to inclusion of multi faith worship at events had not, however, been picked up elsewhere.

11. Mr Kersi Fanibunda offered some personal reflections in the light of recent conversations with colleagues in the faith network, neighbours, and friends:

- There are two sides to the situation. One is the feeling of loneliness, especially if people are living on their own. That is a great worry.
- They try and thank God regarding the technical networks that mean they can communicate with each other. But everybody doesn't have the same facilities for talking on the computer.
- Almost all the supermarkets have a foodbank basket, which is helpful.
- The poor, the financially not so well endowed are suffering.
- The other side of the matter is that there is a feeling of camaraderie though. Everybody is in it together. Also, people are reflecting more and thinking about what they can do to help others, that sort of thing. Not something they do while they're working away. They have extra time available.
- On the whole things are getting on as usual in Newcastle.

12. Mr Robertson said that Tyne and Wear Citizens had contributed hugely to inter faith activity over the last year, through their community engagement and substantial 'listening programmes' as well as a campaign on the Metro. The latter was part of a series of campaigns to tackle the rise in Islamophobia. Mr Lie noted that he had been involved with the Safer Cities Team (part of Tyne and Wear Citizens) for quite a few years now and also worked on the anti-racism listening course. He commented that it was very heartening to see the number of Muslim women coming forward to be involved in the Safer Cities team, with their stories (some horrendous) and troubles as well.

County Durham Faith Network

13. Ms Karenza Passmore explained that she was speaking in place of Carol Spencer. She had been asked to share the following points:

- It's been very difficult to maintain links because of lockdown restrictions and everyone's responsibilities.
- Foodbanks in the area have operating at full throttle as best they can.

- The main focus has been gathering people together as the inter faith group.
14. Ms Passmore explained that she also ran the *North East Religious Learning Resources Centre* (NERLRC). In relation to that:
- The NERLRC is working with local faith communities to develop resources for schools that take a 'post-colonial approach' to RE.
 - Her view is that RE in schools is structurally colonial and racist; what needs to happen now is to look at how RE actually works out, what you do with it and how you break it down in terms of working with local communities.
 - The Centre anticipates planning a national role in relation to developing schools' resources for post-colonial RE. It is currently developing its approach.
 - The Centre has a project which is working with some Muslim and Buddhist friends and colleagues. Involvement in that is separate from her role in the Faith Network, although the project will be drawing on people in that network as part of the resources it is developing.
15. Ms Jacquetta Gomes noted that *Durham University Interfaith Student Network* had moved online as students had been sent home. Dr Mahshid Turner [the University's Muslim chaplain] was posting regularly in that. Ms Gomes was keeping in touch with Lead chaplain, the Revd Gavin Wort. The students were engaging actively with the ISN Facebook page.
16. Mr Robertson offered some observations from a North East Regional Faiths Network perspective on some changes that had happened across County Durham in the last 5-6 years, particularly noting the county's response to the refugees who had arrived. The county had responded to that very much in partnership with the faith groups that are there. In the beginning, when refugees were arriving from Syria, Durham had recognised in terms of the county area, expertise and knowledge of that. It had formed a policy committee, including the faith groups, at a policy level and at an operational officer level, as a way to find the best, most positive ways to proceed in relation to responding to resettlement and rehousing. At the outset the question had been asked whether there were any areas in the North East where the refugee communities had not been housed in more deprived areas. The answer had been 'No'. The county had said 'we will make sure we don't do that' and policy had been developed accordingly. This approach appeared to have been very successful. It had been interesting how communities had responded - not least the response of the faith groups across the county - to a reasonably good settlement in terms of what had happened. This seemed hopeful.

Sunderland Inter Faith Forum

17. The Revd Chris Howson began with some general observations about what was happening in Sunderland:
- At start of the outbreak the main issues the Forum was dealing with were the far right, and their activities in the region. They set up various mutual aid groups – and course everyone wanted to be in a mutual aid group. However, soon you would find pictures appearing of Muslims stacking up trolleys full of toilet paper, or mosques full when places of worship were supposed to be closed. All of which were fake. So they had a bit of a role with the police

monitoring that, and challenging claims mosques were open when they weren't.

- Perhaps partly as a result of the work they did tackling the far right, they have been very much involved in the Black Lives Matter debate as that has come up. The Inter Faith Forum took a lead role in organising the BLM vigil that took place in Sunderland. They looked over at Newcastle and saw some rather disturbing scenes of how the BLM protests had been going. The Forum wanted to approach it differently. So it arranged a peace vigil. The far right did turn up and try and destroy that with violence, but the police arrested those who caused trouble. And they achieved a 200 strong peaceful BLM event.
- Most of their interaction with the local authorities has been around funerals. The authorities wanted to make sure that the Christian, Muslim and Sikh traditions were sticking to the rules in terms of funerals. So they tried to advise people and make sure people were happy. A lot of that was helped by the Durham Diocese who were collating material on a more regional basis.
- They have tried to keep up the work with the refugees, recognising that they are particularly isolated during this period. Tragically there was a suicide two weeks earlier of a refugee in Sunderland. Keeping foodbanks open for refugees has been very important.
- They were a bit concerned that during the lockdown families were being moved into the area, but into places that they couldn't help them and where they would have difficulty accessing city centre resources. So they have kept an eye on that. They were very concerned about isolation amongst the refugee community. He visited a family in Fencehouses (a remote part of Sunderland) completely on their own. Fencehouses is a long way out to be with a young family. And a family of Iranians moved to a part of Washington - not a single Iranian family in that area.
- They organised a lecture around a report that came out from Sunderland University where black students were interviewed over the course of a year. 62% were reported as suffering ongoing racism in the city from the community. So they have been, like Newcastle, having Zoom conferences (though being very mindful of who can get access to those things). These issues are very contentious in a city where the far right are very active, but they are doing their best.
- A member of one of the Allan family, one of the main families who cause a lot of trouble in our region got arrested and was given a two year sentence for assaulting a police officer who was protecting monuments during one of the demonstrations in London. Here there is a very interesting story: one of the monuments was defaced in Sunderland was the General Havelock Monument involved in suppression of the Indian Rebellion (or Mutiny). Paint was thrown on it and 'racist' written on it. At first it might look as if this was BLM motivated vandalism. However it turned out that it was thought that it might have been done by members of the far right.
- So there has been a whole range of stuff to deal with in the city but the Inter Faith Forum has been doing well and faith groups who have found it hard to meet have been making good attempts to be in touch. They have another meeting on Wednesday.
- They had been planning a lot of events for Inter Faith week which will not be able to happen in the same guise, for example the walk of friendship that

Newcastle and Durham sometimes come down to. So they are working out how to do some new forms of inter faith activity online.

Middlesbrough Interfaith Network

18. Ms Shahda Khan said that:

- There are lots of parallels to the issues that the Revd Howson shared in relation to Sunderland. There has been significant concern around far right activity in the North East for the last decade. It has definitely got worse in the last few years and even during the last lockdown period they have had similar challenges.
- One of the first things the Middlesbrough Inter Faith Network did was to reach out to all the various faith groups across the town to map out how people were responding, and also to identify concerns and issues where support might be needed. That information was shared both within the organisation and also within all the various community groups.
- What became clear very early on was that there were significant gaps in terms of the knowledge, especially within the organisation, in terms of how to contact people and who were the key contacts. A lot of this has to do with the impact of austerity and the lack of community engagement staff. And especially because a lot of the internal comms team role seemed to be just to respond to whatever guidance was coming out nationally, and either just put it on the website
- Every household in the town had received a leaflet saying if they needed any help to phone the council or look on the website. But it was all in English. Lots of people will have struggled to understand and some people with visual impairment will not have been able to read it. She created a communication matrix to identify who their audience was and what message they wanted to get out. That was really important to do because the situation was changing almost on a daily basis. Sometimes information that they received in the morning would change by 6pm that evening.
- The Council did a daily community tensions mapping exercise which was co-ordinated across Cleveland by Cleveland police. Each local authority had to send that update. She collated information from the faith groups as well as community groups across the town. They were picking up issues around hate crime but also some of the low level crime happening across the town. There was a very early challenge of some of our Eastern European communities not adhering to the social distancing guidance, which then caused more tension in the broader community. Rather ironically, however, when they had a significant spike in the town it wasn't in the ward where the Eastern European or minority communities live. It was in Thorntree, which is more white communities. Although that may have been linked to having a number of care homes in that ward it did help ease the tension.
- There was lots on social media about 'all these foreigners coming here and spreading Covid' etc and they were concerned about impact on minority groups. They also have a Chinese community centre.
- The university has a significant number of international students so Forum worked with the university on tension monitoring. There were some students from India on a study visa who then couldn't actually work and were struggling, so they worked with the temple to support those students.

- Refugees and Asylum Seekers accommodation has been a very difficult issue. In terms of the national housing providers as new contract was issued. Previously it was G4S who then sub-commissioned Jomast locally in Teesside. G4S weren't successful last time round so it went to a number of companies locally. The asylum accommodation and support contract for the North East went to Mears. They had a whole year of people in difficult circumstances. Over Christmas a number of refugees and asylum seekers were left in hostels and hotels and some of that carried on to when Covid began. Mears were, though, one of the better organisations in terms of responding to diverse communities because they published very early translated version of national guidance.
- The Council set up a local resilience forum with a faith and belief sub group to cover issues around burials and cremations. They've had representation from the Bishop of Whitby, the Bishop of Newcastle, as well as our Catholic Bishop, the Council of Mosques, the Sikhs, and also the Humanists. It was a two way communication that worked really well. The group will be going forward post-Covid both in recovery planning and the wider emergency planning for Cleveland.

Gateshead Inter Faith Forum

19. Mr Vikas Kumar gave an update from Gateshead Inter Faith Forum (GIFF):
- They last met in person 6 months back. Since then they have had individual conversations on the phone but not been able to meet digitally.
 - The GIFF is still active but it's active with volunteers rather than paid staff. They did have a central person a while back who was co-ordinating it.
 - He has ended up co-ordinating a lot of things from the Gem Arts side because there have been a lot of GIFF people been put on furlough or who are shielding.
 - They've been working in partnership with Gateshead Council and helped created online messaging in community languages (everything was in English in the first instance). He has worked with a number of volunteers from faith based communities and various minority communities to create Covid messages, which went out through Gateshead Council and Connected Voice, which is the umbrella organisation for the voluntary sector here in Gateshead and in Newcastle.
 - They have been working with their volunteers to cook Indian vegetarian meals for local vulnerable communities across Gateshead. That started with 40 and has gone up to about 120. They're creating art packs, creative packs, to keep people engaged, to support their health and wellbeing during this time.
 - The Hindu Temple in Newcastle has been helping Indian students who want visas who got stranded. It has been delivering food packages for quite some time to various Indian students across the North East – mainly Newcastle but as far as South Shields, possibly further.
 - They've been working with faith communities especially around cremation and scattering of ashes. There have been issues around people not being able to travel abroad and also not able to scatter ashes locally because local ferries are not taking people out. There is a space on the river allocated within Gateshead for that but that has been vandalised. They are contacting the local

authority to find out how they can create that space for communities to be able to go there to a quiet peaceful space.

- Each local authority area has a local outbreak forum/board which also involves statutory, public sector, and voluntary agencies plus faith leaders. I sit on our local one and we've identified other faith leaders to sit on that forum as well, just in case there are local outbreaks and possible lockdowns and messages need to be communicated to various communities and congregations. Congregations then also know what they need to do if there is an outbreak.
20. Ms Khan noted that each local authority now has an outbreak structure. This is further to the work of the local resilience forum. Each local authority has to is an outbreak action plans just in case. There will be different plans. For example in Middlesbrough there is one specifically on how would the schools respond. Each school will have to plan this separately, but they bring this together in a multi-agency setting. But for a broader plan, similar to the one Vikas is talking about, our Director of Public Health is co-ordinating that, drawing on a group of 30-40 people from every public sector organisation, including the football club and university and police, but also smaller faith and community groups.
21. Mr Robertson commented that The Interfaith Network Middlesbrough, very ably led by Shahda Khan, had become intrinsically linked with the local authority as well as the faith groups. That was very important. Durham was a different context but other types of events had been possible there - like looking at faith and health and wellbeing with the Public Health (which was another development that had happened because of that link with the local authority). It was important, looking to the future, to consider what kind of structures we wanted to come out of a crisis, what new structures would be possible, and how would we like these to be.

Agenda Item 4: Inter Faith Week

22. Dr Crabtree gave a short input about Inter Faith Week, on which IFN led:
- As the presentations at this meeting show, it is possible for much inter faith engagement to take place despite the impact of COVID-19 on usual meeting patterns.
 - IFW can be an opportunity to develop digital communication – and digital can be an important platform for raising awareness of, and responding to, issues that have been discussed such as with racism, the far right, Covid-19.
 - This Wednesday IFN has a local inter faith groups webinar on IFW. Among the speakers is Penny Faust from Oxford Council who will be talking about creating a virtual trails, virtual pilgrimages, virtual faith walks, in the light of a very positive one that they did in Oxford about a month ago.
 - What we're hearing from groups around the country is that many are doing rather different sorts of things this year. They are choosing to do more things using Zoom. Some of them are picking up on the idea of doing short stories about their group's work, taking the moment to celebrate what they've done and talk about its importance, and really put out the message about the significance of their work. Others are doing things that are slightly less challenging such as quizzes. A number of local groups are think about activity with schools involving competitions, art competitions, and so forth.

- IFN has written to local inter faith organisations and to many other types of organisations, including local authorities. A number of local authorities are definitely planning things again this year, in conjunction with local faith groups and local inter faith bodies.
23. The following plans were reported:
- The County Durham Faith Network has an event planned for the evening of Monday 9 November - probably be a Zoom event. It has a planning meeting for this in September.
 - Middlesbrough Interfaith Network's ability to hold events may depend on whether the Diocese has potential to provide secretarial support when Ms Khan's role at the Council finishes this week. However, Teesside University always does something for Inter Faith Week and has a faith co-ordinator who Ms Khan has worked closely with over a number of years.
 - Sunderland Interfaith Forum is waiting to see what the lie of the land is in terms of buildings and spaces. It has a planning meeting on Wednesday. It is likely that Zoom will need to be used. The good side of that is quite an interesting array of speakers can be drawn from outside of the city or region and well as from within it.
 - Durham University will probably do something but at the moment nobody knows what happening with universities. People will probably wait until the autumn term and see what happens, see if lectures are online, if students are going to be back, what the rules around social distancing are.
 - In Gateshead during IFW there is normally an all schools programme using creative artwork around faith communities. It is not yet clear whether external practitioners will be able to be back in to schools by the time of the Week. T waiting on venues and places and partners to give us some guidance in terms of when they might be reopening, and how GIF can deliver work safely.
24. Mr Robertson commented that the difficult/negative issues - BLM issues, hate crime issues, refugee housing issues, or other inequalities - which had been discussed were a daily reality. Every week was IFW. In a sense it was question of how the lens of faith could help people to see these kind of implications and complexities. IFW can be seen as a celebration of interesting things but the reality on the ground must not be forgotten.
25. Dr Crabtree said that Mr Robertson's point that these issues were important year-round was well taken. A key reason that Inter Faith Week had been established was that local inter faith groups originally had been keen for such an opportunity to focus public attention on the things that they were doing. She saw it not as "either or" but as "both and". There was a potential helpfulness is being able to use the week to try and get more leverage in relation to local authorities. Sometimes council members or officers local authorities can be more inclined to engage publicly on the issues in the context of a clearly defined, relatively 'safe' framework.

Agenda Item 5: Any other issues or concerns

26. Dr Hampshire asked if there were any issues or concerns that people would like to raise.

27. A wide range of issues were discussed:

Digital exclusion

28. Mr Kumar said that Gateshead Inter Faith Forum had found through Covid that digital exclusion is a major thing for communities, especially those that cannot afford broadband, data, devices. There were all sorts of safeguarding issues, especially within the communities that it worked with and were most vulnerable. Digital just wasn't always the answer. In fact it could exclude people more, keeping them isolated and lonely. The Forum was trying to find out how it could continue engaging with those communities.

Engagement with local authorities

29. Mr Robertson was particularly concerned about how the political maze could be engaged with in a productive constructive way. He recalled that the previous mayor of Middlesbrough had seen it as important to be at every meeting of the Interfaith Network because it had implications for what he was responsible for.

30. Mr Howson said that Sunderland Interfaith Forum found it hard to engage with the local authority. Council members, while some were sympathetic, were not sticking their head out, in the current political climate (3 seats lost at the last election to UKIP), to support the Forum's work with refugees or inter faith matters. The Forum could see that in Durham, Gateshead, Middlesbrough, Newcastle and North Tyneside councils which had actively engaged with some of this work had been the ones that hadn't had a rise of support for UKIP and the far right parties. So it kept saying to Sunderland Council "Look, this is the antidote, to actually invest in working with these communities and show the community that there's nothing to be feared by engaging with this community." I needed some activity led by the council, but it did not currently have the inroads – either among the local councillors or among the council officers.

31. Mr Fanibunda said that in Newcastle, the Faith Leaders Group had had reasonable cooperation from the Council in the past. It met about twice yearly plus emails and phone all the time. One of the representatives usually came and attended its meetings. The Faith Leaders Group kept in touch with what happened in the Council as well as outside. But at the moment that was not happening because the person who had been attending had resigned. The group had a very close relationship with the police as well. If there was a problem the Police alerted the group by email immediately.

32. Ms Khan noted that she had got 'a bit of a pushback' when asked by the local resilience forum to work with each local authority area to identify the faith leads and people across the town. Each local authority said "But we don't have a version of you working here. There isn't a Shahda at Hartlepool Council or Stockton or Redcar". Some of that is linked to austerity and the fact that the council had had to let go a lot of the people who would have done the cohesion, integration, inter faith type of work.

Social exclusion

33. Ms Gomes offered a personal view on the impact of broader changes in society, commenting on some buildings being just for some people and other buildings being for other people (citing Durham pubs unsafe for students as an example).
34. Mr Howson said that one of the things noticeable in both the lead up to and beyond the whole Brexit process had been the way that suddenly divisions or fractures within society appeared, which weren't so apparent previously. Brexit was not the only reason but he found it interesting that there were certainly groups of people in society who felt particularly excluded from other areas of society. He commented on the aims and the values of the IFN about bringing people together to build better communities, saying inter faith work had never been more important.

Working links with other types of body

35. Dr Crabtree asked about groups' links and conversations with other types of body in the North East which were tackling issues of common concern such as racism.
36. Mr Robertson referred to Just Fair.
37. Mr Howson noted two regional groups, Stand Up to Racism North East and North East Against Racism (NEAR). It was not always easy to engage with them as they working relationship with each other was far from straightforward. Sunderland Interfaith Forum had, however, been linking up closely with the Hartlepool anti-racism group.
38. Ms Khan said the Hartlepool group was 'Poolies Against Racism'. She also noted the North East Race Equality Forum which had academics of the different universities involved. There were also a number of community groups. She saw the various regional groups as a bit disparate and disconnected at the present time.

Faith in the public square

39. Mr Robertson said another question was "What is our understanding of faith in the public square?" When the public body looks out to the faith groups what kind of leadership, using that word, did they look for? And when the faith groups looked to the local authority what kind of leadership did they look for? These questions need further attention.
40. Mr Lie said that developing the religious literacy of the councils was important in the context of how they engage in the public square.
41. Mr Kumar said that Gateshead now had, in common with a number of other areas, a Poverty Truth Commission. This was a new body that allowed a lot of possibilities of engagement around that issues.

Close of meeting

42. Dr Hampshire thanked all participants for their input. He wished Ms Khan well for her new role at MIMA and said he knew, from engaging with her over her work for a number of years, how very important had been her work at Middlesbrough for building inter faith relationships.
43. There had been a great deal of useful information and insights exchanged. He wished all present well with their continuing vital work.
44. The meeting closed at 3.40pm.

7 May 2021