

## THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK

### Minutes of Meeting for IFN member Educational and Academic Bodies and National and Regional Inter Faith Organisations

from 10.30am to 12.45pm on Wednesday 17 January 2024

via Zoom

**Present:** Mrs Charanjit Ajit-Singh (International Interfaith Centre); Ms Carrie Alderton (Faith & Belief Forum); Mrs Barbara Butler (Christians Aware Faith Awareness); Dr David Capey (East of England Faiths Agency CIC); Mrs Cynthia Capey (East of England Faiths Agency CIC); Ms Denise Chaplin (National Association of SACREs); Mr Subash Chellaiah (University of Lincoln Multi-Faith Chaplaincy); Ms Tara Corry (Women's Interfaith Network); Mr Mustafa Field OBE (Faiths Forum for London); Mr Warwick Hawkins (World Congress of Faiths and United Religions Initiative); Mrs Hifsa Haroon-Iqbal OBE (Nisa Nashim); Dr Iona Hine (Cambridge Interfaith Programme); Mr James Holland (Westminster Interfaith); Ms Libby Jones (Wales Association of SACREs); Dr Edward Kessler MBE (The Woolf Institute); Mr Pejman Khojastesh (International Association for Religious Freedom, British Chapter); Mr Bill Moore (National Association of SACREs); Mrs Ravinder Kaur Nijjar (Religions for Peace (UK)); Dr James Roberts (Council of Christians and Jews); Mr Paul Southgate (North East Regional Faiths Network); Dr Stephen Vickers (South East England Faiths Forum); and Mr Martin Weightman (All Faiths Network).

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

**Apologies:** The ASHA Foundation; Durham University Chaplaincy Network; Faith for the Climate; Interfaith Scotland; Inter-faith Council for Wales / Cyngor Rhyngffydd Cymru; Religious Education Council of England and Wales; St Philip's Centre for Study and Engagement in a Multi Faith Society; and University of Salford Faith Centre.

#### **Agenda Item 1: Welcome and meeting context**

1. Dr Harriet Crabtree welcomed participants.

#### **Agenda Item 2: Apologies**

2. Apologies were noted.

#### **Agenda Item 3: Round table introductions**

3. All present introduced themselves briefly.

#### **Agenda Item 4: Minutes of meeting on 27 March 2023**

4. The minutes from the previous meeting were agreed subject to any minor points of correction received by 22 January.

## Agenda Item 5: Religious literacy

5. Dr Crabtree explained that religious literacy had been on the agenda of this group a number of times. IFN's 2023 national meeting had also focused on religious literacy. There had been more public focus on this topic in part, because of the publication last year of the Bloom report. This was a report produced by Colin Bloom who had been appointed as an Independent Adviser by Boris Johnson when he was Prime Minister. The report looked at how the government engaged with faith communities and it emphasised the importance of religious literacy. Since the report had come out, the government had been undertaking a programme of work internally, to explore how it might take forward the report's recommendations. This had included a number of round tables with individual faith communities and also an inter faith round table which she and a number of those present today had attended.
6. Reflections were invited on the Bloom report and on how participants had engaged with that.
7. Mr Martin Weightman said that he found the report double-edged: there were some good recommendations, but the analysis of religion in it was terrible. Religions were put by its authors into three categories: 'true believers'; 'non-believers'; and 'make believers'. This latter category was problematic as it not only defined religion inappropriately, but also violated international standards on freedom of religion or belief and could be seen as discriminatory against new and minority religions. In these references to 'unbelievers', Colin Bloom unfairly equated some of the new and minority religions with a few abusive statements from small religious movements and thus invalidated the integrity of some people's beliefs. He drew attention to an analysis of the report that he had written, which could be found on the All Faiths Network's website [allfaithsnetwork.org](http://allfaithsnetwork.org)
8. Dr Crabtree asked if participants had any reflections on the report's recommendations about encouraging government and others to be more religiously literate, for example those relating to the importance of RE in schools.
9. Ms Libby Jones said that Wales had a very different education system to England. A new subject had recently been rolled out in Wales called 'Religion Values and Ethics' (RVE) which was mandatory for all pupils from the ages of 3 to 16. There was no right to withdraw pupils from this subject and that step had cemented the position of RVE and the importance of religious literacy (although the latter term was not used in it).
10. Ms Denise Chaplin noted that the recommendations from Colin Bloom had been discussed a number of times by NASACRE, which was the national body representing SACREs in England. The hierarchy of types of religious belief which Colin Bloom had created in the Bloom report seemed rather problematic.
11. She went on to say that RE in England, and the benefits of new developments in that was hampered in England by the continued right of parents to withdraw their children from RE lessons. It was good that Wales had got past that barrier. In England, ethics and worldviews were already a part of RE. Through its webinar

programmes - which were offered to SACREs and to the Association of RE Inspectors, Advisors and Consultants (ARIAC) members - it was trying to raise these discussions and debates with SACREs in this country.' Unfortunately, some SACREs were not financially strong. Many SACREs were underfunded and had member vacancies. This meant that they were sometime unable to grasp the nettle of debates and changing contexts. To help address that, NASACRE had arranged a series of webinars for SACREs, such as an upcoming one on finance.

12. Mr Bill Moore said that the Bloom report focused on the quality of religious education, which was a good thing. The RE content was still locally determined and schools needed to build curriculums which met the specific needs of their pupils. One rationale for having a uniform standard was to ensure that non-maintained schools (academies and free schools) were held to account for the RE that they offered. Many academies were either not offering the right kind of RE; or weren't offering RE. They were also not offering adequate salary for RE teachers. More broadly, the main purpose of the content standard was to ensure that those who designed curricula in RE designed ones which were likely to create high standards in RE education. That was very important due to the current international context and also because there was a push in education which had marginalised parts of education.
13. Dr Crabtree said that, in case some present were not aware of the position, RE was a required subject but was not in the National Curriculum. Syllabuses were developed in England and Wales at the local level through bodies called Standing Advisory Councils on Religion (SACRES).
14. Ms Jones explained that RVE, like RE, had its own local framework. WASACRE had produced additional guidance for RVE which had been available to local authorities and the 22 Welsh SACREs when they had been writing their agreed syllabuses. So, there was some basic guidance and that helped to produce consistency across Wales. There was also an extra piece of legislation in Wales which said that RVE must include the fact that there were non-religious philosophical convictions held in England and Wales. That was important to recognise as well.
15. Ms Chaplin noted that NASACRE was awaiting the publication of the Ofsted report on RE. That had been expected before Christmas. She had seen a draft of the report, but its release had been delayed because of issues that Ofsted was facing in relation to its inspection processes. As a result of that, NASACRE had been unable yet to engage schools and SACREs in debate about the findings of the report to do with issues such as consistency, coherence, funding and support. She thought the report might also have to be rewritten after the hiatus due to the inspections matter.
16. Dr Crabtree asked how many of the groups represented at the meeting did work with schools in the RE context?

17. Dr David Capey said that EEFA had used to visit schools, but that had been severely affected by COVID. Schools now went directly to faith communities, so EEFA was no longer the intermediary.
18. Dr Stephen Vicker said that SEEF had drawn up a plan at a recent committee meeting to increase engagement with schools. It hoped to roll that plan out later in the year.
19. Mrs Ravinder Kaur Nijjar explained that she had recently spoken about inter faith activism at a webinar during Inter Faith Week organised by the Faith & Belief Forum. She noted that Birmingham City Council had a very good RE curriculum which was framed around 24 spiritual and moral 'dispositions'. That might be a helpful example for others who were developing RE curriculums.
20. Dr Iona Hine said that Cambridge Interfaith Programme had been working alongside the Faith & Belief Forum to deliver work focusing on the primary and secondary school transition. They had been taking objects into classrooms as a strategy for supporting RE Teachers.
21. It also planned to hold a joint annual symposium with the cohort of teachers who were training in Cambridge. This schoolwork would become an increasingly important part of Cambridge Interfaith Programme's work.
22. Mr James Holland said he had worked with the Education department in the Westminster Diocese to promote interreligious dialogue in its schools, colleges and university chaplaincies. He was interested in learning about any inter faith resources that he could offer to Westminster Diocese's schools and chaplaincies.
23. Dr Crabtree noted that there was also a growing interest in, and need for, training in religious literacy for people in the workplace. There had been a workshop at IFN's National Meeting on that and many members bodies were doing work in this area.
24. Mr Warwick Hawkins said that Goldsmith's University had been running a series of programmes on religious literacy. He wondered whether it might be worth inviting Adam Dinham or Chris Baker to offer a note of reaction on the Bloom report and maybe attach it to the minutes of the meeting. Dr Crabtree said that Professor Adam Dinham had spoken at IFN's National Meeting in July about the implications of the Bloom report. The report of the National Meeting was still being cleared, but would be circulated in the near future.
25. Ms Chaplin said that there was a huge question about religious literacy in the media that needed to be addressed. This question was already being focused on and debated in schools.

#### **Agenda Item 6: Inter faith engagement in the context of impact on UK inter faith relations of overseas events**

26. Dr Crabtree explained that this was a broad agenda item about inter faith engagement in the context or impact of international events. Given the situation

in the last 100 days or so, however, many reflections would likely be on the UK impact of the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October, the subsequent Israel-Hamas war and situation in Gaza, and associated events. The situation was a challenging one and it underlined the importance of work for inter faith understanding, cooperation and good relations. Dr Kessler would be speaking for 10 to 15 minutes about the work of the Woolf Institute and sharing some reflections about what he thought would be helpful in the current context. He was the Institute's Founder and Director and had been engaged with inter faith relations – particularly on the Abrahamic front – for a long time.,

27. Dr Edward Kessler offered the following reflections:

- It was important to recognise the challenge of the moment. He couldn't recall a time in Muslim-Jewish and Abrahamic encounter which had been as difficult as the past two months. Some inter faith groups had fractured and a few had even collapsed.
- One of the areas which had been most challenging had been how we are faced with binaries – increasingly so. The space that is our world of inter faith had been narrowed and narrowed and it had become increasingly difficult to engage in conversation, particularly when it came to talking about Gaza and the Israeli-Palestine conflict. The Woolf Institute had tried to address that in its programme 'Talking Together' by trying to recreate the art of listening. Everyone listened, but sometimes it was difficult to extend this to some of our communities. Many people who crossed the threshold of these difficult conversations were usually clear of the answer to these questions. He often said at the beginning of sessions that he wanted people to be more confused than they were when they arrived. It was about creating that space, challenging that self-assurance and reducing the pressure of binaries.
- Emotions of the moment often ran high, whether that was anger, fear, frustration. Once people sat around the table, they expressed the same emotions. For example, a Muslim lady had said how she was worried about wearing a hijab on the streets of London and on the Tube. After that, a Jewish participant had said he was considering taking his mezuzah off the door. Both examples were about feeling targeted and insecure. It had reached a level where people were fearful of being out on the streets and feared for their children's safety at university. However, once participants heard others saying the same thing and there might still be a sense of 'You're more responsible than me for this conflict', there was also some recognition that other people were also experiencing suffering and worry because of the increased incidence of antisemitism and islamophobia – that was common ground and could help to build a bridge.
- Work in the inter faith arena was about building commonality and this could be difficult.
- It was important to co-produce projects. Sometimes you had to find a safe space, so inviting some people to a mosque or the synagogue might not be the first place to engage in these conversations. The churches in Cambridge had been helpful in providing spaces and the Woolf Institute was also viewed as a safe space by faith groups.
- Woolf had also found that emphasis on the local had been helpful. Some organisations that had not collapsed but had shown resilience had previously built up strong local foundations, for example in Altrincham and in

Northampton. That was partly because they had built resilience at the local level on different issues such as homelessness.

- Persistence was important. For example, in Birmingham there had been three or four attempts to bring Muslims and Jews together under the auspices of the Mayor of Birmingham. However, these had been cancelled and it had been frustrating for the organisers. Eventually, a group met and coming together was so important. The message here was to not give up: there would be people who would cancel and drop out; meetings might not actually happen; but it was important to keep going.
- Some of the principles of this kind of engagement were similar to those of IFN: commonality; providing a safe space for engagement; and dealing with difficult issues. We need to start with what we have in common within our faith traditions and scriptures. Scriptures across all traditions urge understanding between people and building bridges with others.
- Another key aspect was to not avoid difficult spaces and topics. From the beginning, Woolf's project had asked people how the situation had affected them and had just let them speak. Everyone had had their own story to do with work, family, or it could be personal. Safe space was beneficial and allowed people to express what had happened to them in the previous two months. Later on, in either the second-half of a meeting or the second meeting, that could lead on to questions such as: How do we keep the channels of communication open? How do we keep the dialogue going? How do we ensure that this conflict is not transferred from the streets of one place?
- Krister Stendahl, former Dean at Harvard Divinity School and then Bishop of Stockholm, spoke about the various principles that were important in the inter faith world. One was 'equal with equal'. In other words, don't select the best of your scripture or faith community and compare that to the worst of someone else's. If you put forward the best of your community, it is important to put it alongside the best of another. If you wanted to acknowledge the challenges and difficulties of another faith community, you have to acknowledge the challenges of your own community. The experience of the Woolf Institute was that it was best to have this willingness to compare like with like.
- Meetings had been held on Zoom, but face-to-face was much better. The ideal number of participants, in his experience, was between 8 and 14.
- Finally, it might feel like these efforts were just a mere pebble in the pond, but they did make a difference.

28. Dr Vickers asked if he thought that the better established an inter faith movement in a city, the more effective it had been in helping to provide an opportunity for the coming together of people of different faiths. Oxford Council of Faiths had all kinds of 'baptisms of fire' in the past which had led it to develop strong relations at the local level. It had been able to put on a series of peace vigils and there was one that would be coming up this Sunday.

29. Dr Kessler replied that there were two factors at play: the length of time that a group had been established and the local relationships that had developed. The length of time that a group had been around did not automatically mean that a group would be able to cope with the challenges of the moment. Instead, it was about the relationships a group had established. As in Oxford, in Bradford a council of faiths had grappled with a series of local issues. It was both local and

established and this gave it more strength in the local community. It was also easier to have local rather than national conversations, especially currently, as there were some tensions at the senior faith leader level.

30. Mr Weightman commented on the intersection of political and religious intent in Palestine and Israel. The intent of the Palestinian and Israeli Governments were political, but very much enmeshed in the religious beliefs of their populations. In terms of developing conversation, how had the Woolf Institute separated the political and the religious; and how effective was that?
31. Dr Kessler reflected that there were two different situations at play, one in the Middle East and the other in the UK. Regarding the former, he had spent two decades working with actors on the ground in the Holy land, looking at holy sites in Jerusalem such as al-Aqsa, Temple Mount and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Right now, that work had ground to a halt, but his approach had always been to deal with both the political and the religious at the same time. It was not possible to separate them. In the UK context, much of his work had been about limiting the possibility of the transfer of conflict onto British streets. There was perhaps a better chance of separating politics and religion in this context, but it was still unclear whether that really was possible. One could attempt a religious approach and offer a programme just on the 'theology of land' in different faith communities in the Abrahamic context, but also beyond (such as the concept of 'Mother India' in Hinduism). However, it would be very difficult to separate the religious from the political. Politicians were very good at appropriating religion for their own ends, so it was unclear whether it is helpful to separate the two in conversation.
32. Ms Barbara Butler asked if Dr Kessler could say more about how one could engage with those in religious groups whose views were more at extreme end than moderate.
33. Dr Kessler said that words including 'extreme' could be misunderstood and experienced negatively. He remembered Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra starting of one their sessions by saying "I want you to know that I am a jihadist". That woke people up, and then he unpacked what the word meant to him. The term he used was 'hard to reach communities'. Those communities were 'hard to reach' partly because people often found it difficult when they did not understand the culture and the language that were core. In other words, people were not literate enough. One way to reach those communities was through means understandable to those communities. In the UK, conversation was often transactional, i.e. in our conversations I do this and you do that. However, when it came to some more strictly observant faith communities, the conversation was less transactional. One needed an understanding and a familiarity with the language and the culture and the religion that was being expressed by that community, which and required a knowledge that many people did not have, making it harder to approach these 'harder to reach' communities in a non-threatening way.
34. Ms Chaplin said that SACREs developed curricula in partnership with local faith and belief communities and local authorities. These were often well-established partnerships where people had learnt to work alongside each other respectfully.

The idea that they were working together to make young people more religiously literate, more comfortable with each other, helped to develop that partnership. SACREs existed in some areas where there weren't strong inter faith groups. Those established partnerships, built on understanding and mutual respect, might be valuable in maintaining relationships in the current context.

35. In response to a query about the organisation Solution Not Sides, Dr Crabtree explained that a representative from Solutions not Sides was invited to speak today, but he was not free to do so. More information about the work of SNS's work with schools could be found on their website <https://solutionsnotsides.co.uk/>.
36. Mr Mustafa Field offered support to those who were struggling to work with Muslim groups in their local communities. Faiths Forum for London could offer some advice and guidance on that and could help begin those conversations in the London area. Often those inter faith relationships needed to be developed and that required trust.
37. Mrs Hifsa Haroon Iqbal explained that she was the chair of trustees for Nisa Nashim, an organisation of Jewish and Muslim women. The name of the organisation was Arabic and Hebrew for the word 'women'. The idea of recreating the art of listening, put forward by Dr Kessler, really resonated with her. It was a difficult situation for Jews and Muslims in the UK and relationships built on love and friendship had recently become strained. Outside the Nisa Nashim context, she had recently developed a company which did training and consultancy. Last week, she had been in a college in Birmingham. It was obvious that people there had not grasped how difficult it was at present for teachers in schools which are 80 to 90% Muslim. Many teachers were finding it difficult to talk about events in the Middle East and this came back to the point about recreating the art of listening.
38. Mr Bill Moore said that he was interested in Dr Kessler's comments about the ideal number of people for discussions (14-18). He thought it depended, however, on what you wanted. About 10 years ago the Buckinghamshire Interfaith Forum had organised a series of World Café events which had been very engaging. People had had an opportunity to talk and listen and they had numbers between 15 up to 40. The struggle they had was actually about how they could move these positive events forward afterwards into a larger project.
39. Dr Kessler said that you could have more participants if there was a real willingness to listen. But if you wanted everybody to be able to talk, you need a smaller number. In the context of the 'so what' question, it was all to do with the current moment. Right now, there shouldn't be high expectations; just a focus on getting people across the threshold to talk with each other about difficult issues. It was important to keep these channels of communications open and to support one another.
40. Ms Carrie Alderton explained that the Faith and Belief Forum's organisational focus and response had been on the challenges that it was seeing in schools. Some of those issues had come up in conversation it had been having with

teachers and senior leadership teams. Schools and universities were facing increasing rates of Islamophobic and antisemitic hate crime. It was also seeing some schools shutting down conversations and there was a lot of confusion about impartiality versus neutrality and how schools were interpreting guidance about those.

41. FBF had also created, in conjunction with the National Citizen Service, a webinar for youth workers and teachers. That had been delivered in partnership with Solutions Not Sides and Facing History and Ourselves. The original webinar had included sections on: skills for dialogue, facilitated by FBF; islamophobia and antisemitism, provided by Facing History; and tropes and how to challenge them and hate crime, delivered by Solutions Not Sides. FBF was hoping to scale up its offer and bring in two more webinars, one for teachers and one for youth workers. Those would be delivered in partnership with National Citizen Service, Together for Humanity and the Black Youth Alliance. FBF was also organizing an event with those organisations, in Parliament with MPs and sector leaders on 13 March. If anyone present wanted to come, they were welcome to get in touch. It would be an opportunity to discuss the issues they are facing. On 17 April, FBF would also be co-producing a response with young people so they can bring their voices to MPs again after. That would use storytelling approaches about the experiences of young people and their communities.
42. Dr Crabtree noted that IFN – no doubt like many other inter faith bodies – had been helping organisations think about how people could engage well with difficult conversations of the kind that were happening in a number of contexts at the present time. IFN had worked to support local groups and others through phone calls, advice and the provision of material which tackled the hate crime dimension such as information put out by CST and TELL MAMA.
43. IFN had a policy on making statements which precluded making statements on international events except in the limited circumstances of impact on UK interfaith relations. Some member bodies had similar policies. When there were major international occurrences affecting particular communities in the UK there was sometimes a hope, even an expectation, on their part that statements would be issued. But that often went beyond what inter faith organisations were able to deliver. That could lead to feelings of disappointment and a belief that an inter faith organisation was not fully with them. This was something that people had been wrestling with in local groups around the country, even in those places where some groups had managed to put out statements such as Manchester. IFN itself had experienced some expectation that it would put out a statement condemning the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel of 7 October. That was not possible under its statement policy, with the Sunday Telegraph making unattributed references to concerns in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about that.
44. Mr Field thanked Dr Crabtree for this reflection on the difficult circumstances that IFN and many other groups in the sector were facing. He went on to add that a lack of confidence in, and funding for, the inter faith sector had also been really detrimental to groups such as those present. If a national body such as IFN could be dealt with by Government in the way that was currently happening, then every

inter faith group was vulnerable. This showed a need for collective action. The government had a lack of understanding that it needed now more than at any other time.

45. Dr Kessler agreed that all inter faith groups were vulnerable. He added that the Woolf Institute was just about to start a research project looking at the impact of the Israeli Palestinian conflict over the last 10 to 15 years on UK communities. That would be a two-year study and would involve the creation of a toolkit.
46. Dr Crabtree thanked Dr Kessler for his presentation and response to questions and comments.

### **Agenda Item 8: The Inter Faith Network for the UK**

47. Dr Crabtree spoke briefly about IFN's funding situation and highlighted a few aspects of IFN's recent work.
48. On March 31 last year, IFN had received a communication from the Government saying that it would not provide funding from 1 April (the following day). A strong campaign of support from member bodies and others followed. The government had written on 7 July to say that Ministers had reviewed the Department's relevant programme areas and that some funding was being offered to IFN for the period from July 2023 to March 2024. A limited amount of underspend from the previous year could also be accessed. Like all government funding offers, this offer was subject to terms and conditions and funds could not be accessed until there was a Grant Funding Agreement (GFA). IFN had still not received the GFA. Last year, IFN had also experienced delay on the GFA for offered funding. However, this present delay was longer: it had now been six months since IFN received the original letter.
49. IFN had not been told that the government was not going to fund it and was still waiting for a grant funding agreement or other decision. However, it was very difficult to keep taking forward IFN's work in the absence of one of the main budgeted sources of income. Its Board was keeping the financial position under careful scrutiny and would be meeting again next week to look at the position. IFN had never viewed itself as automatically entitled to government funding and always made its case carefully. Member bodies might wish to write again to the Department about the matter.
50. Some past allegations about IFN had been recycled in some material put out online and apparently also in letters to the Department. A Circular that had gone out earlier that day made reference to one such source. IFN had looked at the allegations when they first were made some years ago and it refuted them. It had taken legal advice where necessary.
51. Inter Faith Week 2023 had been the biggest yet. Over 1000 activities were known to have taken place. School numbers continued to be very high. It seemed that a number of people had used it to have helpful conversations in the margins of meetings even where they were not formally engaging with each other due to the impacts of events in the Middle East.

52. IFN had planned a Local Inter Faith Practitioner Day in October, but this had need to be postponed. It was planned to re-arrange that for a date in February.

### **Agenda Item 7: Exchange of information on projects, key news, current concerns and interests**

53. Dr Crabtree invited each organisation to provide a brief update on their key recent activities.

#### *The Women's Interfaith Network (WIN)*

54. Ms Tara Corry said that:

- WIN continued its education project. The resources it had produced could be accessed online for free. These were for both Key Stage 1 and 2 classes. The resources consisted of animated short films with corresponding resources that tapped into certain areas of the curriculum and enabled safe engagement with difficult conversations that could have a positive impact. The primary school resources focused particularly on conflict resolution and helped the teacher talk with young children about conflicts between communities.

#### *Religions for Peace UK (RfPUK)*

55. Mrs Kaur Nijjar said that:

- RfPUK worked in three main areas: gender equality, the environment and the leadership role of women in faith.
- In June 2023, RfPUK's Women of Faith Network had launched a toolkit called 'Gender equality - empowerment for all'. That looked at work that it had carried across two years on a project called 'Women, Peace, Dialogue and Empowerment'. It had also held an exhibition called 'The Dignity of Women – Scriptural Reflection' which looked at challenging religiously motivated gender violence by highlighting what different scriptures said about the honour and status of women. As part of the exhibition, RfPUK had organised a range of workshops and training sessions. The exhibition could be accessed online at <https://www.rfpuk.org/>.
- The group had recently asked its inter faith allies to speak out against violence against women. There was a video series about that which could be seen on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/@RfPUKIYN>
- RfPUK also had a Youth Interfaith Network. This had been doing a project with the Refugee Integration Programme. It had sponsored 5 London trips for refugees from 26 countries, facilitated by Hillsong Church UK.
- The RfPUK Youth Interfaith Network had also organised a series of 'Eco-Peace Café' webinar events which aimed to inform young people about social action, to encourage them to take part in that, and to train them to do so. The webinar series had ten themed sessions by international youth speakers and seven facilitator training sessions. It looked at themes like sustainable architecture, the Earth Charter and waste management.

### *Faiths Forum for London (FFL)*

56. Mr Field said that:

- FFL continued to carry out its project 'Beyond Dialogue'. That involved working with young people across London to get them to connect and have conversations. It was part of a broader move to promote inclusive understanding, respect and dialogue across communities.
- Unfortunately, FFL had seen a rise of religious intolerance, hatred and prejudice following the events of 7 October. Since then, a lot of its focus had been on Jewish and Muslim dialogue and on combatting polarisation between the communities.
- It had been a big learning exercise for FFL to engage stakeholders of the integrated groups that it worked with. Some stakeholders had been vocal about not wanting to be sat in the same room as someone taking a different position such as being supportive of the war in Gaza or wanting a ceasefire. That had been polarising and challenging politically. However, it was very important to understand each person's experiences. FFL were holding a number of sessions which aimed to create safe spaces for people to listen to each other. FFL's funding was limited, but it would probably have around 100 young people engaged with the programme each month which was positive.
- Some organisations that had been doing good jobs in this area of work had been undermined and faced internal division over the issues.
- Inter faith work and interaction was uncomfortable at this time and this was being felt in schools and universities. Necessarily, the discussions were a bit uncomfortable as one was bringing people from different sides together; that was not in itself a negative thing.
- FFL also continued with its work in schools. Schools were now coming to the Forum, asking for visits. That showed the impacts of the current context.

### *The Faith & Belief Forum (FBF)*

57. Ms Alderton said that:

- FBF would be holding its annual inter faith youth summit on 8 February. That would be at the London School of Economics. Its focus would be 'Faith and the Climate'.
- It had launched a three year project researching the intersection of restorative justice and inter faith dialogue and how the concept of restorative justice could be applied to certain instances of faith-based hate. That project was funded by the National Lottery. It was being rolled out that programme in Glasgow, in partnership with Interfaith Glasgow; and also in Solihull, in conjunction with Why Me.
- FBF had also launched another round of its project which engaged with parents. That used objects to aid RE teaching in the North West and West Midlands. The project was based in primary schools and the objects were used to get community members and parents involved in the teaching of RE. If anyone knew of any schools that would be keen for involvement, she would be glad to hear from them.

### *Cambridge Interfaith Programme (CIP)*

58. Dr Iona Hine said that:

- CIP had undertaken a short-term research project on Water and/in religious relations <https://www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/news/new-report-water-and-in-religious-relations> which had concluded with 7 recommendations, identifying education needs amongst industry stakeholders and tasking researchers and educationalists to address this. Further work was planned and CIP was interested in involving schools as well as industry. The overarching OFWAT-funded project had continued. All were welcome to attend the conference Being with Water OTHERWISE (15-16 April). These efforts were a component of a larger body of work at the intersection of climate change and religious literacy (a related Summer School announcement would follow next month).
- CIP had also (partly in conversation with FBF) piloted approaches to teacher literacy/confidence issues with Years 5-8 using an object-led approach <https://www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/research/current-research-projects/material-approaches-and-interfaith-encounter>. Free discussion resources were available from its Scripture and Violence project website, [www.scriptureandviolence.org](http://www.scriptureandviolence.org). That had been used with success in some schools, although there was further work to be done providing guidelines for school and workplace settings.
- It had a longstanding research investment in Muslim—Jewish relations, including via the Entangled Otherings project <https://www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/entangled-otherings> and work with a Berlin-based NGO developing counter-prejudice education resources. Some fresh work was under way at the intersection of religion, language, and neurodiversity.
- CIP had been looking at developing and strengthening its connections with organisations outside academia. That was a priority for it presently, so if IFN members saw opportunities for collaboration, she would be pleased to hear.

### *East of England Faiths Agency (EEFA)*

59. Dr David Capey said that:

- EEFA had been in existence for almost 21 years. In its early years, funding had been easy to locate and EEFA had also had a lot of support from various sources in its later years. However, funding was becoming more difficult to find.
- More significantly, EEFA's directors were getting older. Unless it could succeed in finding new people to replace the Board of Management, it would have to wind up in the next few months.
- He expressed his sympathy for the problems that IFN had experienced recently and hoped that funding would soon become available.

60. Dr Crabtree thanked Mr Capey for his kind thoughts about the current position on IFN and Government funding. She noted the remarkable amount of work that EEFA had done over the years, with great impact, particularly in its region, and offered congratulations on that, on behalf of IFN. Organisations might come and go; it was the work above all that mattered. She hoped that EEFA's legacy would continue in new ways and be built on by other people.

### *Christians Faith Awareness (CFA)*

61. Mrs Barbara Butler said that:

- CFA's women's inter faith group continued to meet. It had recently organised a pilgrimage to places of worship around Leicester. That had included visits to a mosque and a synagogue. Participants had been very well received at each place of worship.
- The group had also continued to work on issues such the environment, peace and healing in the world.

### *Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ)*

62. Dr James Roberts said that:

- CCJ had produced a resource a few years ago called 'Listening and learning'. That was about Israel and Palestine and was based on CCJ's programme of taking study groups to the region. There was much resonance between the contents of that and many of the comments that had already been shared about the need to listen and about multiple perspectives.
- Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) was coming up on 27 January and the theme would be 'the Fragility of Freedom'. There were additional challenges around marking HMD this year because of the conflict in the Middle East. CCJ had been signposting helpful guidelines about celebrating HMD which could be seen on its website <https://ccj.org.uk/guidance>

### *All Faiths Network (AFN)*

63. Mr Weightman said that:

- AFN had hosted a series of events on 'the value of inter faith in society'. It had produced a book on this theme a couple of years ago. In November, it had held an event in Parliament, hosted by Sir Stephen Timms MP and with a presentation on a project called 'Interfaith Works' by the Woolf Institute and Faiths Forum for London.
- There was also a law proposal going through the French legislative process which was concerning as it might infringe upon freedom of religion. There would shortly be a piece on AFN's website about that.

### *Nisa Nashim (NN)*

64. Mrs Haroon-Iqbal said that

- Recently, NN had held a listening event just for Muslim women which had been facilitated by the Forum for Discussion on Israel and Palestine (FODIP). The event had allowed Muslim women to talk about how they were feeling and given them a bit of a release and an opportunity to listen to each other. It was planning another of these meetings, with Jewish women.
- It had also been working with Together for Humanity to support a series of walks and peace vigils. Its local groups had done a number of events in areas such as the West Midlands.

*North East Regional Faiths Forum (NERFF)*

65. Mr Paul Southgate said that:

- The North East had the highest rates of child poverty; the lowest levels of employment; the lowest life expectancy; and the worst educational attainment. Underlying this, was deep structural injustice and inequality. NERFN had organised a series of breakfast seminars which offered a faith perspective on these issues. These had been organised in conjunction with Durham Council. The next session would focus on the future of the NHS.
- Last year, it had launched a new, sub-regional inter faith body called South Tyneside Faiths Forum. That had begun meeting in Inter Faith Week 2022. The group had a diverse membership and its next event aimed to get young people together to engage in a roundtable discussion on how faith has shaped and continued to shape their lives.

66. Dr Crabtree explained that most regional faith forums had lost government funding in 2011 when regional governance structures in England had been dismantled. The two remaining Regional Forums NERFN and SEEF – continued to have a significant role but were now run on a voluntary basis. Faiths Forum for London also continued, but that had always been of a somewhat different nature.

*National Association of Standing Advisory Committees on Religious Education (NASACRE)*

67. Mr Moore said that:

- NASACRE was planning to draft – under the auspices of its patron Charles Clark – an apolitical manifesto that SACREs could use. That would highlight the importance of RE in promoting community cohesion, dialogue, understanding and community. That was in its early draft phase.

*The University of Lincoln Multi-faith Chaplaincy (ULMC)*

68. Mr Subash Chellaiah said that:

- During Inter Faith Week 2023, ULMC had held a 'Faith and belief awareness day'. That had involved working closely with the chaplaincy team and some of the academic staff. It had been a positive event and ULMC planned to make it an annual event.
- It had also been working alongside faith communities in Lincoln, including the local Jewish and Islamic communities. For Mitzvah day, it had worked with the local Jewish community to develop a peace garden on campus.
- The second Saturday of each month also saw ULMC's 'World café', an opportunity for students to meet with local faith communities. That had been successful despite the recent impacts of events in the Middle East.
- Lincoln was also changing positively as a city - the university was expecting thousands of new international students.

### *International Interfaith Centre (IIC)*

69. Mrs Charanjit Ajit-Singh said that:

- IIC's trustees were getting older and were located in different places across the country. The conflict in the Middle East had prompted the trustees to consider what they could do to help build bridges. That was largely focused on the humanitarian side of things and on promoting peace and justice.

70. She also highlighted the work of Hounslow Friends of Faith (HFF), another organisation to which she belonged. For a number of years, it had run a women's knitting group which brought together people across Richmond and Hounslow. That had become much bigger. HFF also had meetings and projects which focused on issues such as the Ukraine war and UK social issues. Dr Crabtree added that HFF's knitting group had been included in the recent IFN publication on women's local inter faith activity <https://www.interfaith.org.uk/resources/deep-connections-womens-local-inter-faith-initiatives-in-the-uk>. That could be found on the IFN website and had many examples of crafts, as well as many other types of activity.

71. The participant attending on behalf of the World Congress of Faiths and United Religions Initiative UK, Mr Warwick Hawkins, had needed to leave the meeting prior to this Agenda Item but provided the following updates in the Chat before leaving.

#### *World Congress of Faiths (WCF)*

The latest issue of the WCF Journal, Interreligious Insight, was now available. In regard to the situation in Israel and Gaza, WCF was planning a vigil in the Houses of Parliament to bring together its Jewish and Muslim members in solidarity and prayer.

#### *United Religions Initiative UK (URI UK)*

An international delegation from URI Europe and URI Global would be visiting the UK in early March. URI UK would be running conferences in Birmingham, Sandwell, Coventry, Leicester and North London to introduce them to the UK inter faith scene and gain fresh perspectives. Anyone interested in attending could let them know.

### **Agenda Item 9: Closing reflections from the Chair and Agenda Item 10: End of Meeting**

72. Dr Crabtree thanked all for their contributions. It was always a privilege to be able to facilitate a discussion such as this. She hoped that participants had found helpful the discussion and each other's reflections about how inter faith engagement could be taken forward in these uncertain and difficult times and that they had also found useful the special presentation by Dr Ed Kessler. Notwithstanding all the challenges and the precariousness of inter faith work at this time, the kinds of interesting and inspiring projects about which information

had been shared at the meeting had an important role to play in building religious literacy and common understanding and helping humanity.

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