Do missionary endeavours automatically cut across the development of harmonious relationships in a religiously plural society? Does true dialogue inevitably exclude mission? What are the ethics of mission and of dialogue in a multi faith country? These are profound questions which pose a long term challenge to all people of faith. They are also issues of key importance to those grappling with the legal and political implications of rights of freedom of belief and practice.

This booklet explores these issues. It has been published as a consultative document by the Executive Committee of The Inter Faith Network. It builds on material produced by a multi faith working group set up by the Network which met during 1992.

The booklet ends with a "code of conduct", endorsed by all the Network affiliated organisations, on building good relations with people of different faiths and beliefs. This code offers a shared ethic of inter religious encounter.

Mission, Dialogue and Inter Religious Encounter

The
**Inter Faith
Network**
for the
United Kingdom

Mission, Dialogue
and
Inter Religious Encounter:

A Consultative Document

Preface

This consultative document has been produced by the Executive Committee of The Inter Faith Network for the UK in order to encourage discussion and reflection on the issues with which it deals. Its broad approach has the warm support of the Network's affiliated organisations.

The launch of the Decade of Evangelism/Evangelisation by the Christian Churches in Britain has led to considerable debate about the place of mission and evangelism in our religiously plural society and about their impact on relations between members of different faith communities.

It was therefore decided that the Network should examine these issues in some depth and a Working Group was formed for this purpose with members drawn from within and beyond the Executive Committee. We are very grateful to this Working Group which held a series of meetings in the course of 1992 to discuss the issues involved and initiated work on this document.

The members of the Working Group were:- Sri Akhandhadhi das; Ms Carmen Henry; Rabbi Dr Julian Jacobs; Dr Penelope Johnstone; Mr Vinod Kapashi; Dharmachari Kulananda; the Revd Canon Dr Christopher Lamb; the late Professor Gobind Singh Mansukhani; Maulana Shahid Raza; and representatives from the Council of Christians and Jews, which included at different meetings Rev Jonathan Gorsky, Mr Paul Mendel and Sister Margaret Shepherd; together with Mr Brian Pearce and Dr Harriet Crabtree of the Network staff. The text which the Working Group prepared forms the basis of the present document which also takes account of subsequent discussions in the Network's Executive Committee and of comments on the earlier draft from its affiliated organisations.

The document concludes with a "Code of Conduct" for building good relations with people of different faiths and beliefs. It sets out a shared ethic of inter religious encounter. The wording of this Code has been endorsed by the Network's affiliated organisations as a contribution to the celebration of 1993 as the international Year of Inter Religious Understanding and Cooperation. The Code is also being published separately and will be available in a variety of languages. We hope it will achieve a wide circulation and acceptance.

July 1993

Mission, Dialogue and Inter Religious Encounter

Introduction

1. The Christian Churches in Britain, as elsewhere in the world, have declared the last decade of this century a "Decade of Evangelism".* After the Decade was launched, other British faith communities expressed fears that their members might be singled out as targets for conversion. This concern is rooted in painful recollections of past history and in a sense of their particular vulnerability as minorities in British society. In response, reassurances were given by Church leaders that the primary goals of the Decade are the rekindling of the faith of nominal Christians and the drawing in of those with no existing religious commitment.

2. These exchanges have prompted many to reflect more deeply on how far mission and evangelism on behalf of any faith can be reconciled with constructive and trusting dialogue between those who belong to different religious communities. Do missionary endeavours automatically cut across the development of harmonious relationships in a religiously plural society? The debate has also led to deeper reflection on the nature of inter religious dialogue. Does true dialogue inevitably exclude mission? What are the ethics of mission and of dialogue? These are profound questions which pose a long term challenge to all people of faith.

3. This document examines the nature of "mission" and "dialogue", and the relationship between them, with a particular awareness of the situation in Britain today, which includes the disturbing presence of racial and religious prejudice and harassment, and the need to combat these. It explores what can be said, not from a single faith's perspective, but jointly from within the different faith communities represented in The Inter Faith Network: Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh. Members of them have worked closely together in the preparation of this text.

4. The approach which the document takes is grounded in the basic belief that in our plural society there needs to be mutual respect for one another's integrity and convictions, and that this should characterise *all*

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*"Decade of Evangelisation" is used by the Roman Catholic Church.

our relationships with people of other faiths and beliefs. It concludes with a "code of conduct" for our relations with people of other faiths and beliefs, which draws both on these present reflections and on points made in the Network's earlier *Statement on Inter Religious Relations in Britain*. The Network hopes that this "code" will receive a wide circulation around the country as a tangible contribution to the common task of building a society rooted in our shared values.

The Missionary Impulse

5. "Mission" as a general term means the "sending out" of members of a religious tradition not only to put their faith into practice but also to share it with others. Many of the world's major religious traditions have within them a missionary impetus. This derives from a conviction of their universal relevance and a consequent desire to share their convictions of the truth with others, to provide them with the opportunity for "enlightenment" or "salvation" or to invite them to adopt the same values and to follow a similar pattern of life.

6. From its very start, Christianity has been a missionary faith with a specific call to "evangelism", which means making known "the good news" which it believes is addressed to all people. In Islam there is likewise a basic requirement for *da'wah*: inviting others to respond to the message brought by the Prophet Muhammad. Both traditions have a long history of expansion in many different parts of the world and of incorporating newcomers into their faith communities. The Buddha invited his followers to spread his teaching widely although only to those who wish to hear it. A missionary impulse is also to be found within more recent religious movements, such as the Baha'i faith. The Jewish community, however, does not actively seek converts (as it once did many centuries ago) although it still accepts new members. It sees itself rather as simply called to offer its way of life as an example for others. The same would be true of the Jain community. The Sikh community does not set out to make converts but will welcome those who decide of their own accord that they wish to follow its teachings: its founder invited people to devote themselves to deepening their existing religious commitment. There are many strands in the Hindu tradition. Most of these seek to spread knowledge of their teachings as a means of encouraging the progress of individuals along their particular spiritual paths, but without requiring them to renounce a previous religious affiliation.

7. Despite their different approaches to the question of mission, all major religious traditions believe that they have truths and insights which are of value to the whole of humanity.

Different Understandings of the Nature and Scope of Mission

8. Within any religion there are in practice different understandings of its tradition. Because of this, in missionary religions there is likely to be a range of interpretations of the nature and purpose of mission itself. For example, it has been understood by some within them to require the proclamation of their faith, usually with an invitation to others to adopt it. By others it has been understood simply as providing accurate teaching about the faith. For many, service to others, solidarity with them and the pursuit of justice are at the heart of mission. The most persuasive demonstration to others of the value of one's faith is often seen to be the living out of its teachings in one's own life. But service is not necessarily allied to missionary endeavour: it is central to the self understanding of many faiths.

9. Just as the precise nature of mission may be variously understood, even within the same tradition there will be different views of the proper scope and audience of mission. Mission may, for example, be seen as directed internally towards members of a community itself, for purposes of renewal. Or, it may be seen as directed particularly at those who currently have no religious commitment. More broadly, the scope of mission has been understood as encompassing everyone. Some have interpreted this as requiring a systematic attempt to bring all people into a particular faith community in order that they may be "saved" or come into the fullness of truth. This may involve the missionary in persuading members of other religious communities to change their existing religious allegiance. The term "proselytising" is widely used today to describe this activity. In this respect, the nature of the missionary endeavour is bound to be significantly shaped by beliefs about the truth and validity of other religious traditions.

Responses to Mission

10. It is widely acknowledged that many faith communities wish to proclaim their faith and to invite others to share it and that their missionary endeavour is carried out with sincerity, and stems from deeply held convictions which others can respect even if they do not share them. However, certain practices are objectionable in any missionary context and will cause particular difficulties in inter faith contexts. These are practices which involve unethical emotional or intellectual manipulation of people who are vulnerable because of age, illness, isolation, or social situation.

Reactions to Proselytism

11. In a multi faith society difficulties can be caused by proselytising activity involving attempts made by members of one faith community to convert those of another. Why is this?

12. The attempt to convert a committed member of another faith inevitably implies a judgement that the other faith is mistaken or, at the very least, inadequate by comparison with the missionary's own faith. It may consequently be experienced as a disrespectful dishonouring of what that faith holds most sacred and most dear. Also, since for many religious people their faith is a central part of their sense of self identity, conversion attempts may be experienced as an assault on their very being. For similar reasons, a conversion campaign aimed *specifically* at members of a particular religious community is often experienced as an attack on that community's integrity and way of life. Particular tensions can be caused by converts to a new faith working to persuade others from their former faith to leave and follow their example.

13. A community which is less powerful will feel particularly vulnerable to targeting by a more powerful one. This is because of the long and sad record of forced conversion and insensitive missionary practice, which has often been allied to political, economic, military or cultural imperialism, and the tragic history of inter religious conflict. The sense of vulnerability is often deepened by the simultaneous experience of racial, as well as religious, prejudice and discrimination or abuse, which members of minority communities encounter in the course of their daily lives. It is against this background that there can be particular concern and resentment at attempts to undermine existing religious identities and commitments.

14. Negative responses to mission are sometimes rooted in a view of faith which views changing one's religion as pointless or even intrinsically wrong, because religious identity is seen as fixed by birth. According to this view, nothing is to be gained by changing one's religion. What matters is staying where one is and practising one's own faith with sincerity. Communities with such an outlook tend not to seek converts themselves and are likely to express a strong resentment of others' attempts to convert them.

15. In some cases, negative responses to mission arise from a conviction that once a particular religion has been adopted it should never be abandoned. In this context, an individual's departure to another faith community may be seen as betrayal or apostasy and therefore be strenuously opposed. This belief cannot easily be reconciled with the view which is held strongly by others that freedom of conscience of the individual is paramount, and that a decision to change one's faith is a matter of personal choice alone as part of an individual's spiritual journey.

16. For all these reasons proselytism gives rise to particular difficulties and can create serious tensions in the relations between different faith communities. There is, therefore, a particular responsibility on those who engage in it to respect the integrity of others and to consider carefully the limits which this places on the approaches which it is legitimate to employ.

Mission Can Lead to Understanding

17. While certain approaches to mission can be detrimental to inter faith relations, encounters between missionaries of one faith and committed members of another have in some cases led to an increase in the mutual understanding of the two traditions. This is because the process of mission has itself inevitably involved dialogue between committed members of them, often for the first time. In the Christian tradition, for example, some missionaries have been among the first to recognise the spiritual resources which other religious traditions have to offer and to argue for the value of open dialogue with them.

The Growth of Dialogue

18. Today, increasingly, when people of different faiths encounter one another to explore matters of faith it is in the context of a mutual dialogue. There will be those who stand aside from this, perhaps from religious conviction, perhaps because of fear or lack of self confidence, perhaps because of racist attitudes, or simply because they do not expect others to have anything of value to offer them. There can be no compulsion on anyone to take the path of dialogue and it can be difficult to establish that basis of mutual respect and equality which is needed for true dialogue. However, there is a growing recognition of the need for a better understanding of each other's faith to provide a sound foundation for co-operation in tackling common problems. Most importantly, the new emphasis on dialogue arises from a developing awareness that if we want to be listened to ourselves, we must listen in turn. If we want to be genuinely understood, we must also make the effort genuinely to understand others. This realisation draws strength from those teachings in our various religious traditions which enjoin us to treat with respect those who belong to other communities.

The Variety of Dialogue

19. Just as mission takes a variety of forms, so does dialogue. The term can be applied to any shared conversational encounter: not just to some specialist activity. Dialogue may have different contexts and different agendas. It may be primarily concerned with theology and spirituality. It may be focused on social issues, as men and women of different faiths come together to discuss how to work towards shared social goals. It may be conducted between official "representatives" of different faiths or between people who have simply come together in a particular locality or with some shared interest. It may involve people with particular knowledge or training, or people who claim no special expertise. It may arise out of a special concern to overcome a past history of conflict, and perhaps of persecution, or of persistent stereotyping and mis-understanding.

Mutuality and Dialogue

20. The common characteristic of all dialogue, however, should be an openness based on relationships which are both mutual and voluntary. Any genuinely satisfactory relationship between free persons has to be a *mutual* one, where there is a willingness to receive as well as to offer, based on a recognition that others may have fresh insights of value and truth to offer us from their spiritual tradition and from their personal experience of life. And any relationship which is grounded in true mutuality must be a *voluntary* one. Any attempt to impose ourselves or our views when and where the other person is not willing to receive us is an unacceptable infringement of that person's integrity and privacy.

Honest Expression of Convictions in Dialogue

21. It is sometimes suggested that dialogue evades the real issues and ignores the differences between religious traditions, focusing only on what is shared and precluding an honest affirmation of beliefs which might offend others. This is a misconception of the nature of true dialogue. In true dialogue, we should not set aside deeply held convictions and values, nor feel unable to express our faith.

22. Just as it is mistaken to assume that there is no room in dialogue for an honest expression of our religious convictions, so it would be wrong to think that there is no room within dialogue for informed argument about matters of faith. As committed people of faith, we do not speak from neutral positions. When we are discussing matters of profound significance to us, it is natural to want others to recognise that our convictions are well founded and deserve respect. We may want to invite others to accept these convictions for themselves, but it is for them to decide how to respond to this.

Dialogue and Difference

23. In dialogue, there is the hope of finding genuine common ground. At the same time, there is a need to identify differences and to understand the reasons for them and to learn from them. Respect for other views does not exclude critique of them. We cannot abdicate our responsiblity to make some assessment of the theological or philosophical truth and the moral and spiritual value of other traditions, both for ourselves and for our society. In examining one another's arguments we can often gain a better appreciation of where truth lies. Where we agree to differ we can do so with greater clarity about those differences. Only through people with differing perspectives coming together can we hope to grow in mutual understanding. If the encounter is restricted to those who already share the same perspective this would undercut its basic purpose.

24. There may be beliefs and practices which we find it difficult to accept. We are entitled to oppose these where we conclude that they are wrong and damaging. However, our judgments about the beliefs and practices of others should not be formulated on the basis of ignorance and prejudice. They should always be informed by, and be affected by, a process of dialogue in a spirit of genuine openness. We need to learn how to question one another about our different beliefs and practices in a way that is sensitive and unthreatening.

Vulnerability and Risk in Dialogue

25. The way of dialogue is not a soft option. There is an obligation to respect the agreed "ground rules" which may apply to a particular inter faith meeting or which may be observed by a particular organisation. But even where people are extremely considerate and respectful of each other, there will always be the possibility of hurt or offence even if this is unintended. Dialogue inevitably entails vulnerability.

26. Those who meet together in dialogue are usually challenged by their encounters in a positive way which leads to a deeper and more committed faith. However, we cannot predict the ways in which our attitudes and views will be affected by genuine engagement with other people. For this reason, dialogue inevitably entails risk.

The Path of Dialogue

27. Genuine dialogue requires a mutual openness with an agreed agenda which reflects the interests and concerns of all those taking part in it. It

requires also a willingness to integrate the outcome of the encounter in our understanding of ourselves, of our dialogue partners and of the world in which we live. It is through listening to each other that we can draw on the experience and wisdom of others and thus widen our own experience and the resources on which we ourselves can draw. In this way, dialogue can be a source of mutual enrichment in our common search for truth. On the basis of mutual respect it can lead to the development of mutual trust.

Mission and Dialogue

28. In the past a sharp distinction has often been drawn between dialogue and mission. This is mainly because of the attitudes and methods which have accompanied many missionary attempts to convert people of other faiths. However, mission and dialogue do not in practice have to be understood as stark alternatives. In both we put before other people what we truly believe, although in dialogue we more clearly recognise and accept that our relationship is a mutual one. Today, many of those who belong to faiths with a commitment to mission recognise at the same time the need to take seriously the faith of the people they encounter and the spiritual insights of the traditions from which those people come. Some have, indeed, come to understand the nature of mission in a fresh way as a call to engage in dialogue with one another.

The Position in Britain Today

29. We need to relate our thinking about mission and dialogue to the society in which we live. Britain today has a widely accepted and valued commitment to freedom of religious conviction and practice. There is a freedom to commend one's faith to others and a freedom to adopt a particular religious faith, possibly abandoning one's commitment to another faith in the process. Where these freedoms exist, it is hard, particularly given the range of modern communications, for communities or individuals to insulate themselves from the interchange of varying ideas and beliefs, even if they wish to do so.

30. All countries have their own religious history. Over many centuries, the Christian tradition has played a major part in shaping the culture of Britain. Even apparently secular institutions and patterns of life in our society often have their roots in the Christian tradition. Minorities have more limited influence over educational institutions and access to the media. These factors can make it more difficult for their religious communities to maintain the integrity of their traditions and ways of life and can compound their sense of vulnerability in a society which is too

often marked by racial and religious prejudice, hostility and, at times, even violence. It is therefore particularly important for larger and more powerful groups to be sensitive to the needs and vulnerability of the various minority groups within this society.

The Building of a Shared Community

31. As people of different faiths and beliefs we live side by side as neighbours and share a common citizenship. There is a growing recognition of the need for us to meet with one another and to share our deepest convictions about the purposes and values which we want to shape our society. We cannot go on to build a common society together unless this is underpinned by trust between our different communities.

32. If our encounters with those of other faiths are to be constructive, our desire to share our convictions with others must be balanced by a readiness to be self-critical and to accept criticism from others. We also need to show a proper degree of self restraint, coupled with respect for the integrity of others and a willingness to recognise what they can in turn offer which is of value to us. This is not simply a pragmatic requirement for our relationships in a more plural society: it flows from the duties and obligations of our individual religious traditions. We must approach the inter faith encounter in a spirit which will make it truly fruitful for us all, respecting differences but seeking common ground.

Building Good Relations with People of other Faiths and Beliefs: A Code of Conduct

33. We therefore need to develop together a shared ethic of inter religious encounter. This means working towards an agreed approach to relationships between persons or communities of different faiths and beliefs, regardless of whether we understand our primary concern in terms of mission or of dialogue. If there is to be a sound basis for trust between us, we need to treat each other in all our dealings in a consistently principled way.

34. Accordingly, from the perspective set out in this document, we offer the following "code of conduct" for our inter religious encounter in all its different aspects. This draws on the reflections in this document on mission and dialogue and the relationship between them, but does so in the wider context examined in the *Statement on Inter Religious Relations in Britain* released by the Network in 1991. We hope this "code", summarising the approach we commend to inter religious encounter, will achieve a wide circulation and acceptance.

Building Good Relations with People of Different Faiths and Beliefs

In Britain today, people of many different faiths and beliefs live side by side. The opportunity lies before us to work together to build a society rooted in the values we treasure. But this society can only be built on a sure foundation of mutual respect, openness and trust. This means finding ways to live our lives of faith with integrity, and allowing others to do so too. Our different religious traditions offer us many resources for this and teach us the importance of good relationships characterised by honesty, compassion and generosity of spirit. The Inter Faith Network offers the following code of conduct for encouraging and strengthening these relationships.

As members of the human family, we should show each other respect and courtesy. In our dealings with people of other faiths and beliefs this means exercising good will and:

- Respecting other people's freedom within the law to express their beliefs and convictions

- Learning to understand what others actually believe and value, and letting them express this in their own terms

- Respecting the convictions of others about food, dress and social etiquette and not behaving in ways which cause needless offence

- Recognising that all of us at times fall short of the ideals of our own traditions and never comparing our own *ideals* with other people's *practices*

- Working to prevent disagreement from leading to conflict

- Always seeking to avoid violence in our relationships

When we talk about matters of faith with one another, we need to do so with sensitivity, honesty and straightforwardness. This means:

- Recognising that listening as well as speaking is necessary for a genuine conversation

- Being honest about our beliefs and religious allegiances

- Not misrepresenting or disparaging other people's beliefs and practices

- Correcting misunderstanding or misrepresentations not only of our own but also of other faiths whenever we come across them

- Being straightforward about our intentions

- Accepting that in formal inter faith meetings there is a particular responsibility to ensure that the religious commitment of all those who are present will be respected

All of us want others to understand and respect our views. Some people will also want to persuade others to join their faith. In a multi faith society where this is permitted, the attempt should always be characterised by self-restraint and a concern for the other's freedom and dignity. This means:

- Respecting another person's expressed wish to be left alone

- Avoiding imposing ourselves and our views on individuals or communities who are in vulnerable situations in ways which exploit these

- Being sensitive and courteous

- Avoiding violent action or language, threats, manipulation, improper inducements, or the misuse of any kind of power

- Respecting the right of others to disagree with us

Living and working together is not always easy. Religion harnesses deep emotions which can sometimes take destructive forms. Where this happens, we must draw on our faith to bring about reconciliation and understanding. The truest fruits of religion are healing and positive. We have a great deal to learn from one another which can enrich us without undermining our own identities. Together, listening and responding with openness and respect, we can move forward to work in ways that acknowledge genuine differences but build on shared hopes and values.

OFFICERS

Co-chairs:
Rabbi Hugo Gryn (Senior Rabbi, West London Synagogue)
Mr Indarjit Singh (Chairman, Sikh Council for Interfaith Relations)

Vice-chairs:
Dr Mughram Al-Ghamdi (Director General, Islamic Cultural Centre, London)

Mrs Ivy Gutridge (Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group)

Mr Om Parkash Sharma (President, National Council of Hindu Temples)

Rt Rev Roy Williamson (Anglican Bishop of Southwark)

AFFILIATED ORGANISATIONS:

Representative Bodies:
Afro West Indian United Council of Churches; Arya Pratinidhi Sabha (UK); Baha'i Community of the United Kingdom; Board of Deputies of British Jews; Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland Committee on Relations with People of Other Faiths; Buddhist Society; Council of African and Afro-Caribbean Churches (UK); Council of Mosques (UK and Eire); Friends of the Western Buddhist Order; Imams and Mosques Council (UK); Islamic Cultural Centre, Regents Park, London; Jain Samaj Europe; Maha Bodhi Society of Sri Lanka (UK); National Council of Hindu Temples; Roman Catholic Committee for Other Faiths of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales; Sikh Council for Interfaith Relations (UK); Sikh Missionary Society; Swaminarayan Hindu Mission; Vishwa Hindu Parishad (UK); World Ahl ul-Bayt (AS) Islamic League;World Islamic Mission (UK)

Inter Faith Organisations:
Council of Christians and Jews; International Association for Religious Freedom (British Members' Group); London Society of Jews and Christians; Standing Conference of Jews, Christians and Muslims in Europe; World Conference on Religion and Peace (UK and Ireland Chapter); World Congress of Faiths

Local Inter Faith Groups:
Birmingham Fellowship of Faiths; Birmingham Inter-Faiths Council; Bradford Concord Inter Faith Society; Bristol Interfaith Group; Cambridge Inter-Faith Group; Cardiff Interfaith Association; Coventry Inter Faith Group; Derby Open Centre Multi-Faith Group; Edinburgh Interfaith Association; Glasgow Sharing of Faiths Group; Harrow Inter-Faith Council; Kirklees and Calderdale Inter-Faith Fellowship; Leeds Concord Inter-Faith Fellowship; Leicester Council of Faiths; Manchester Inter Faith Group; Medway Inter-Faith Group; Merseyside Inter Faith Group; Newham Association of Faiths; Nottingham Inter-Faith Group; Oxford Round Table of Religions; Peterborough Inter-Faith Council; Reading Inter-Faith Group; Redbridge Council of Faiths; Richmond Inter-Faith Group; Rochdale Interfaith Action; Tyne and Wear Community Relations Council Inter Faith Panel; Walsall Inter Faith Group; Waltham Forest All Faiths Group; Wellingborough Multi-Faith Group; Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group

Educational and Academic Bodies:
Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan; Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Selly Oak, Birmingham; Centre for the Study of Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations, Selly Oak, Birmingham; Community Religions Project, University of Leeds; Institute of Jainology; Islamic Foundation, Leicester; Multi Faith Centre, Birmingham; Religious Education Council; SHAP Working Party on World Religions in Education; Standing Conference on Inter-Faith Dialogue in Education; Study Centre for Christian-Jewish Relations, (Sisters of Sion)