

THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK

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

at 10.15am on Thursday 27 November 2020

by Zoom

Present: Mr Michael Berkson (Cambridge Inter-Faith Group); Dr David Capey (East of England Faiths Agency); Mrs Cynthia Capey (East of England Faiths Agency); the Revd Max Drinkwater (Newmarket Inter-Faith Forum); Mr Peter Gerrish (Bedford Council of Faiths); Mr David Griffith (Norwich InterFaith Link); Mr Chris Hall (Inter-Faith Group for NW Essex); Ms Barbara Hill (West Suffolk Faith and Community Forum/ Bury Inter Faith Forum); Mr David Jonathan (Luton Council of Faiths); Mr Richard Leslie (Hertsmere Forum of Faiths / Dacorum Interfaith Network); Mr Shawn Martin (Inter-Faith Group for NW Essex); The Revd Canon Ivor Moody (Mid Essex Inter Faith Group); Ms Francoise Murphy (Watford InterFaith Association); Mrs Rose Norgate (Waveney Interfaith Circle); The Revd Thomas O'Brien (North Herts Faith Forum); Ms Barbara Richardson-Todd (Ipswich Faith and Community Forum / EEFA); Ms Anuradha Sharma (Stevenage Interfaith Forum); Ms Valerie Skottowe (Welwyn Hatfield Inter Faith Group); and Ms Pam Spychal (Greater Yarmouth Inter Faith and Belief Network).

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

Apologies: Council of Christian Muslim Relations in High Wycombe; Hertfordshire Inter Faith Forum; Inter Faith St Albans; and Wisbech Interfaith Forum.

Agenda Item 1: Welcome and introduction

1. Dr Harriet Crabtree, in the chair, welcomed those present and invited them to introduce themselves.
2. A period of silence was held, remembering all those working to build good inter faith relations, and those who had lost their lives due to Covid-19 or were in other ways affected by the pandemic.

Agenda Item 2: IFN update, including inter faith working during COVID-19

3. Dr Crabtree said that since the start of the pandemic, IFN had continued its general work, including linking local groups, academic bodies, national and regional bodies and faith communities. However, a lot of work was also focussing on responses to, and sharing information about, COVID-19. IFN's Faith Communities Forum had also been meeting more regularly than usual – monthly during the early period of the pandemic – enabling faith communities to share and learn from one another as they responded to the impacts of COVID-19.

4. There were lots of examples of faith groups working together, for example on food justice, throughout the pandemic, such as in Bradford, Luton and many other places. It was a difficult time, though, as many organisations were run on a voluntary basis and there was huge extra demand.
5. Inter faith and faith groups were working out how to keep linking in a time when in-person meetings were not possible.
6. Inter Faith Week, which had just ended, had been a huge piece of work, but surprisingly cheering. Numbers had dipped a bit but there had been some very creative ways of marking the Week. Watford, for example, had held an online pilgrimage, and in Mid Essex they had held another energetic quiz. Art had played a very important part in the Week this year as well. Art translated well to the online world, and a number of interesting competitions had taken place. IFN was still finding more examples of schools marking the Week.
7. Mr Ashley Beck said it had been encouraging seeing the sheer range of ways that people had found to mark the Week. It had also been interesting to look at the survey responses that had come in from those who had organised activities: so far these had suggested that while initially reticent about doing things online, many had found that this had brought benefits. For example their online activities had seen greater numbers of participants than they would have expected at an in-person event of a similar kind. A number had also said that they were already considering ways to incorporate an online element into their activities after the pandemic, such as through live-streaming.
8. Mr David Jonathan congratulated IFN and its leadership on what it was achieving during what was a challenging time. It provided motivation to groups. The e-bulletins were particularly helpful and so full of energy. Dr Crabtree thanked Mr Jonathan for his kind words, and said that local groups likewise inspired and motivated IFN's team.
9. The Revd Thomas O'Brien asked if people were aware of Colin Bloom's consultation [on government engagement with faith groups] and the report of Danny Kruger which included a recommendation about a deal between Government and faith communities. Dr Crabtree said that Mr Bloom's consultation had been highlighted in a recent Circular to member bodies. It had a particular focus on religious literacy and related issues, rather than specifically inter faith activity. The report from Danny Kruger MP had been included in a past Circular; it was a report to the Government on building on the community spirit shown during the pandemic. As had been said, it included significant recommendations about faith communities and national and local government working together.

Agenda Item 3: Local inter faith organisations' updates

10. Dr Crabtree invited representatives of local groups to explain briefly about the organisations that they were representing; share something of their work; and reflect on the challenges and opportunities that they were facing.

East of England Faiths Agency (EEFA)

11. Mrs Cynthia Capey said that:
- EEFA had launched a new Faith Centre and received a very large donation of books from the cathedral library.
 - It was working on a new game called 'Staging Posts on the Journey of Life', working with police and health authorities.
 - She and her husband David Capey were grateful to have been paired with a Humanist 'buddy' as part of the Inter Faith Week Buddies scheme. They had had a fruitful exchange.
12. Dr David Capey said that:
- A key part of EEFA's work for many years had been sending speakers into schools and taking schools on visits to places of worship. This had had to stop during the pandemic, as it was too risky for most of the volunteers.
 - This had, however, meant that EEFA had been able to build up a series of resources for schools on its website, including past publications.

Cambridge Inter-Faith Group

13. Mr Michael Berkson said that:
- The group had for some time been moribund. He would like to book a time to speak with Harriet and Ashley about possible ways forward.

Hertsmere Forum of Faiths (HFF) and Dacorum Interfaith Network

14. The Revd Richard Leslie said that:
- HFF members were trying to keep in touch with each other and to make a new offer using technology.
 - The Forum had made available a small series of videos during Inter Faith Week.
 - The Jain community had planted trees in Bushey.
 - ISKCON had completed its new building and made a virtual tour available.
 - Keeping in touch and aware of each other's activity had been key.
 - It was very important to find local groups with particular expertise in using digital platforms, making videos etc.
 - He had recently retired and moved to Dacorum, so was listed as attending also for Dacorum Interfaith Network.
 - The Dacorum Interfaith Network was active. It sometimes drew on the expertise of the local Indian Association which had a programme at the time of Diwali.
15. Dr Crabtree said that the question of whether one could find local groups which had expertise in certain areas was a very relevant one. It had been striking how during the pandemic a number of groups had links with others locally who had expertise on using digital platforms or making videos. For example, North Kent Inter Faith Group put together a really nice video of messages of hope during Inter Faith Week. They already had in-house expertise on making those sorts of videos.

Greater Yarmouth Inter Faith and Belief Network (GYIFBN)

16. Ms Pam Spychal said that:

- GYIFBN had created a leaflet earlier in the year listing over 100 places of worship in the borough. It had planned to give that to hotels, but no one could take leaflets at the moment because of COVID-19.
- It had run a poetry festival using its Facebook page. That had seemed to go very well.
- The group was struggling a bit with its communications. Its Chair only used email. The group's secretary had been unwell (now on the mend) and none of the other officers had had access to the mailing list, so it had been hard to keep people in touch except via the Facebook page.
- It had held a Zoom meeting where only two people had attended. However, the officer were determined to keep pressing!
- The group had arranged to lay flowers at the war memorial as part of the local Remembrance Day activities.
- A key aim was to raise the profile of the group so that people were more aware of it.
- Usually, at this time of year the group would be putting up a sponsored Christmas Tree in the Minster.

17. Dr Crabtree said that the 'digital deficit' could be a challenge, including where people were confident with some platforms and not others. There were so many communication choices now available and for meetings there were varying preferences – some preferred Zoom and others Microsoft Teams. Yet others preferred just using the phone. Sometimes just the key officers in a group were unable to use any of the digital communication options. IFN had made available special surgery slots for local inter faith groups to talk about an aspect of their digital communications if they wished to do so.

Inter Faith Group for North West Essex (IFG4NWE)

18. Mr Shawn Martin said that:

- IFG4NWE formed in 2016, following the Paris massacre and Year of Mercy, it was an attempt at World peace.
- It worked closely with B-DIFF (Braintree District Inter Faith Forum) which was a great mentor.
- The local area was not very diverse, but the Census did show some diversity.
- They had set up many other Groups, courtesy of Facebook, to signpost people to inter faith and other groups/events. The Anglican and Catholic churches in a neighbouring town had supported another Group.
- The local Baptist minister was a keen, founder member. The Catholic Church publicised and housed meetings. URC/Methodist, Quaker, the local paper and business had been wonderful with publicity.
- They had found that not everyone was interested in inter faith – sadly some faith leaders were not keen.
- The Revd Tim Hardingham, who had co- founded the Group, had sadly passed away about a month previously.

19. Mr Chris Hall said that:
- He was mostly involved with the Saffron Walden group.
 - It had had some good conversations, and people had been able to voice various issues.
 - There were ups and downs, but it was hoped that a wider group of people locally would wish to get involved over time.
20. Dr Crabtree observed that keeping links alive could often be more challenging than building them in the first place, as it was a continuous piece of work. There were still some areas where inter faith activity was seen as a fringe pursuit, although this was rarely the case at national level now.
21. Ms Spychal commented that there were more than 30 Anglican churches in Great Yarmouth, but she was the only paid up Anglican member of the inter faith group. This was not to say that there was no support of it, but getting sustained engagement was hard work.
22. Dr Crabtree said that it could be helpful to revisit the aims and objectives of groups periodically. The reports on local day events – on IFN’s website – contained some pointers on looking at aims, looking to see who might be involved and working to strengthen and extend programmes. Some faith communities also had officers and networks to support inter faith activity. For example, the Church of England had the Presence and Engagement Network, and its Co-ordinator could be helpful to talk with. Most Dioceses also had an inter faith advisor. The Board of Deputies of British Jews also had an Interfaith Officer who supported local groups when they sought information or advice.

Mid Essex Inter Faith Group (MEIFG)

23. The Revd Canon Ivor Moody said that:
- The group had begun after the September 11 2001 attacks in the US. Several of the different faiths in the area came together. There was a very strong shared feeling that they needed to meet and to begin to react together. MEIFG had been going ever since.
 - It was a very loose group without a constitution and it did not hold AGMs.
 - Since the pandemic began, members had been forced to think about what their community was doing in response, and to address issues of loneliness and isolation.
 - He was also Chair of Essex Faith Covenant, working with Faith Action. The Covenant had been established in 2017. The Covenant existed to try to improve relations between faith groups and local authorities. Some other members of Mid Essex Inter Faith Group had worked with him on that project. Essex County Council had responded positively to the contribution that faith can make.
 - He had emailed members asking for positive stories about how faith groups were meeting the needs of those vulnerable or alone, as the Council was consulting more widely on this.
 - In some ways, the pandemic, awful as it was, had galvanised people and encouraged them to work and also to communicate more widely their good work.

24. Dr Crabtree said that the relationship between local authorities and local faith communities was very important, and local inter faith structures often played a vital role in this. The Faith Action website had more information about the Covenant if other groups wished to pick this up. Faith Action serviced the All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith in Society, which is chaired by Stephen Timms MP, an MP with a longstanding interest in faith and social action. The Covenant had been developed by the APPG and taken forward by Faith Action. Groups might be interested to invite an input from its Director, Daniel Singleton.

Luton Council of Faiths (LCF)

25. Mr David Jonathan said that:
- Nearly 80% of the people in Luton were religiously affiliated.
 - LCF had been liaising a lot with Luton Council, the Police and the Resilience Forum a lot during the pandemic.
 - It was also trying to provide help to the vulnerable, and consulting on 'excessive death planning'.
 - This work was the more onerous due to the frequently updated advice from Government.
 - LCF was also responding to the Black Lives Matter movement and structural inequalities, which were very evident in Luton as a working class, ethnically diverse community.
 - People and communities had come together well during the period, and there was an active COVID-19 support group on Facebook with over 5,000 members.
 - Within the faith communities there had been immense generosity expressed in food donations for the foodbank, particularly during the time of religious festivities when people really couldn't come together and congregate to celebrate. They had chosen to celebrate differently by raising funds and also by raising lots of food donations. The 'digital deficit' was also an issue locally. The High Sheriff had initiated an appeal, supported by faith communities, to provide laptops and internet access to those who could not afford this.
 - LCF had produced electronic guides to help people with their mental health, as well as podcasts on mental health and wellbeing and bereavement, featuring faith leaders.
 - It had also held a Zoom event to mark International Day of Peace.
 - LCF had run three Inter Faith Week events in partnership – one with the Community Security Trust, and one with the local Sai group featuring non-stop multifaith devotional singing for peace. It had also run one with Near Neighbours called 'Stories of hope'.
 - LCF had also held an event about sharing hope in the face of loss, and seeing light through the darkness. Faith communities had been invited to bring prayers, poems, reflections and inscriptions.
 - A press release about that event had been sent to the local newspaper, and the Editor, who was not a person of faith, had written back saying that the reflections had been very calming and reassuring to read.

- There had also been some challenges, including Britain First arriving outside a mosque. However, due to the pandemic the mosque had only had a few people inside and so the impact was less than it might have been.
- A local Hindu Mandir had also been sent anonymous hate mail by someone claiming to be Muslim. The Forum was trying to encourage conversations between Muslim and Hindu leaders so that this kind of incident did not create divisions locally.

Ipswich Faith and Community Forum (IFCF)

26. Ms Barbara Richardson-Todd said that:
- IFCF had held a Holocaust Memorial Day event in January which had been very successful and well attended. A local school had also been involved.
 - In February, an Evening of Reflection had been hosted by the Mayor, to explore the presence of faiths in Ipswich and their contribution toward tackling the issues faced by the community. The police, social care workers and local politicians had all been involved, and a follow-up was planned.
 - IFCF was not yet very good with Zoom, and so had not done much since March when the pandemic began. It had, however, held Trustee meetings via Zoom and was looking at how it might hold other types of meeting via Zoom.
 - The University had changed its chaplaincy structure, and the group had been helping to link that with local faith groups.
 - The Chair had represented the group in laying a wreath as part of the Remembrance Day ceremony.
 - It had been planning to hold a 'Faith Lecture' in March at the University, featuring Ed Kessler of the Woolf Institute. This had been postponed until 2021.
 - A storytelling event was in development. This would be led by a Pagan member who was a skilled storyteller.
 - The group was also working on a 'faith and food' cookbook.
 - The group had produced a directory of local places of worship, and this was on its website.
 - When it was possible to do so, a small group from the Forum would be going out to build relationships with local places of worship.
27. Mr Berkson said that the Jewish community in Cambridge had been running a successful support programme during the pandemic. Its biggest challenge was 'digital reluctance'. There was a scheme to provide people with the technology needed to connect, but some simply refused to take it up.
28. Mr Martin asked which places of worship would be visited. Ms Richardson-Todd said that it was planned that the gurdwara, temple, mosque and local churches would be visited. This was not, however, a 'faith trail' style event – it was Trustees visiting to build better relationships. The group had run visits of the other kind in the past, often visiting the places all in one day using a bus belonging to the local Constabulary.

North Herts Faith Forum (NHFF)

29. Mr O'Brien said that:

- NHFF included Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims and different Christian communities. It had been established in 1987.
- It had good links with the local Churches Together group, which always received a report on inter faith activity.
- The Forum had held its last AGM during Inter Faith Week.
- Members had worked together to develop a Peace Garden. Some had donated a field for that near Much Hadham.
- The Forum had had a presentation from a Jain community in Bushey about their tree planting project. Working together on environmental issues was seen as a helpful way of uniting groups.
- It was working with Herts Inter Faith Forum.
- For Holocaust Memorial Day, the Forum had invited different faith communities to a commemorative event in Letchworth. North Herts Council had been supportive of this.
- North Herts Council was encouraging promoting inter faith dialogue and working together.
- Locally there was also a local food distribution centre. That included helpers from all faiths. The group was also supporting a foodbank with the Trussell Trust. The foodbank was likewise supported by all the faiths.

Newmarket Inter-Faith Forum (NIFF)

30. The Revd Max Drinkwater said that:

- The group had not had many online meetings.
- A key contact in the Muslim community had been stuck in India due to lockdown.
- Personal connections had flourished, as people turned to each other for help and support.
- Mosque and church led projects had been working together well.
- Communities were working together on issues such as opening places of worship safely.

Watford InterFaith Association (WIFA)

31. Ms Francoise Murphy said that:

- WIFA had been very lucky that one of its Committee members was very capable with Zoom, so they had been able to make use of it early on.
- When the first lockdown began, the group had started to hold a weekly prayer meeting.
- It had then begun to hold discussions on particular topics, such as life after death, science and religion etc. Moving to online meetings had meant that many more people could take part than if the meetings had been held in person. Double or triple the numbers.
- It had also held Week of Prayer for World Peace activities online.
- WIFA had been working more with the Mayor and MP during the pandemic and that had made the wider community more aware of its work.

- Seventh Day Adventists gave out many free meals in Watford, and WIFA helped with that.
- WIFA played a role in the annual 'Watford Celebration', an annual festival. It had taken place online last year.
- WIFA now had a YouTube channel, which included the inter faith pilgrimage video.

32. Dr Crabtree also fed in an email message from WIFA Secretary Judith Bruni which said that:

- WIFA had had several faith leaders' forum meetings and exchanges of help and advice on areas such as mental health and wellbeing, meals for children, safe play times and areas for underprivileged children, Small Acts of Kindness, warm things for elderly isolating people, and various ways of keeping in touch, such as children writing to elderly people where use of the internet was not viable.

Norwich InterFaith Link (NIFL)

33. Mr David Griffith said that:

- The group had moved over to Zoom meetings in March, with monthly meetings since. Topics had included: statues, Navratri, and working with the Coroner. The Navratri one had included a Hindu presentation on the theme of the spirit within people and there had also been contributions from a Bahai and a Christian.
- The group would be involved with Universal Appeal in the run up to Christmas, and with World Religions Day, linked to the Baha'i Faith, next year.
- With its committee, regular meetings and these sorts of topics it was drawing in quite a lot of people that it had not met before.
- NIFL had a useful link with the Inter Faith Adviser for Norwich Diocese.
- A Community Ambassador from Rosedale Funeral Homes had created a special video with the group, which was on YouTube. They had also provided the necessary funding. The video had also reached new people.
- The group was presently thinking through its website which was a kind of shop/store front and was important in signalling towards the faith communities.
- In their area there was also a Christian-Jewish organisation and a science and religion organisation.
- He had been very encouraged by hearing at the meeting about what other people were doing.

34. Dr Crabtree noted that IFN had highlighted during Inter Faith Week the video with the excellent discussion of faith leaders from the are about response to COVID-19. It was very much worth watching, as were the other contributions that had been mentioned during the meeting.

West Suffolk Faith and Community Forum/ Bury Inter Faith Forum (BIFF)

35. Ms Barbara Hill said that:

- The group had re-named itself Bury Inter Faith Forum, as it had never really reached across the whole of West Suffolk – its original name had been aspirational.
- BIFF had planned to hold its AGM in March, but had had to cancel that. At it, many of the Committee members had been planning to retire, which had meant that the group found itself in the following months in a form of limbo.
- The AGM had eventually taken place in Inter Faith Week, which had been a big boost.
- The group had kept its networking going, and was working closely with the local council.
- At the AGM, a local councillor had been appointed, which was encouraging.
- The ideas shared during the present meeting had been a big encouragement, and showed what was possible.

Waveney Interfaith Circle (WIC)

36. Ms Rose Norgate said that:

- She had had a challenging start to the year, as her husband had died in February, and then lockdown had come in in March.
- Waveney was a rural area with small market towns. Its biggest town was Lowestoft.
- There were not many established communities from non-Christian faiths, so the group was mostly a network for friends from different faiths and its focus tended to be social.
- It tried to post thought-provoking things each day on its Facebook pages.
- Usually, the group took part in a Christmas Tree festival, which was virtual this year. It contributed a virtual tree on the theme of light.
- The group was likely to focus its efforts on Lowestoft next year, as it was the most multifaith area locally.
- It had also taken part in the Rosedale Funeral Home video, which had been a great opportunity.

Bedford Council of Faiths (BCF)

37. Mr Peter Gerrish said that:

- BCF had been founded around 40 years ago out of Bedford in Harmony, which had been an initiative of the progressive Jewish community at the time.
- The group had links with Sandy as well, as well as with Luton Council of Faiths.
- The group advised individuals and communities on faith matters, and on social action linked to faith.
- It hosted exhibitions and vigils and welcomed representatives of other important groups in the community, such as the emergency response group, the SACRE, the university chaplaincy, Bedford Indian Community Committee, Helping People Helping Places (a programme of Public Health Bedford), and the University Sustainability Forum.

- It played an active role in the local Holocaust Memorial Day activities, including helping to organise the civic commemoration.
- The group had not been able to hold in-person meetings of any kind, as its members were mostly older and at greater risk from the pandemic.
- It had held its AGM in Inter Faith Week.

Welwyn Hatfield Inter Faith Group (WHIFG)

38. Ms Valerie Skottowe said that:

- Welwyn and Hatfield were not as diverse as some towns, but WHIFG linked most of the faith communities with a presence in the towns.
- The group held an open meeting each month, with different communities hosting. These had continued via Zoom since March.
- The group had lost some participants because of the necessary switch to Zoom, but it had also gained some.
- Welwyn Garden City would have been celebrating its centenary in March – with WHIFG playing a role in this – but the celebrations were now being postponed until 2021. It was hoped that they would still be able to feature the planned open air performance from Kadam Dance Company.
- The group had held 6 online meetings about gardens and faiths. 5 more were planned with the final being the live performance.

39. The meeting asked for its good wishes to be conveyed by Mrs Skottowe to Mr Reynold Rosenberg, a longstanding member of WHIFG who was currently in hospital.

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

40. Dr Crabtree said that coming out of the reflections shared, two or three things had really stood out. One was the stalwart work that everyone was doing to keep nurturing links. Second was the challenge of extending and developing those links. It varied from area to area. But third, and perhaps most visible, was the 'digital divide' and how we communicate.

41. Noting shortness of time, she invited one or two reflections in response to the question "How can we empower people to use digital communication more effectively?" IFN would be building on that and taking thoughts away from the meeting.

42. Mrs Skottowe said that one elderly Muslim member of WHIFG did not feel comfortable using Zoom, so meetings had been timed to be when his sons were at home and able to help him.

43. Mr O'Brien said that many in his parish had had help from younger members of their family to use technology during lockdown. That had the added benefit that the young people heard about their work!

44. Mr Martin asked whether faith leaders at national level had been encouraged to get involved with inter faith activity. Dr Crabtree said that many were very much involved. IFN's national Faith Communities Forum, for example, brought together

representatives of national faith community bodies, and through it many faith leaders had issued positive messages during Inter Faith Week. These could be seen on the Inter Faith Week website.

45. Mr Leslie said it was worth collaborating with neighbouring groups. He had taken part in Watford Inter Faith Association activities and learned a lot from them.
46. Dr Crabtree said that that reflection on shared learning was a good place to draw the meeting to a close.
47. Those present were asked whether they were content for their email addresses to be shared with others present, and asked to let the IFN office know after the meeting.
48. Dr Crabtree thanked everyone for their interesting and frank contributions to the meeting.

30 April 2021