INTER FAITH RELATIONS

IN THE UK:

THE NEXT DECADE

Report on the

2000 National Meeting of

The Inter Faith Network

for the UK

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**Held on 4 July 2000
at the Rosebery Hall of Residence
of The London School of Economics
90 Rosebery Avenue, London EC1**

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The Theme of the Meeting

The Shared Act of Reflection and Commitment by the faith communities of the UK held in the Houses of Parliament on 3 January, which the Network helped to organise for the Government as part of the First Weekend Millennium celebrations, exemplified the progress made in recent years in the development of inter faith co-operation and an inclusive approach to public life. The purpose of the Network's 2000 National Meeting was to discuss how inter faith relations need to be developed in the coming years.

Proceedings

Following the Network's AGM for 2000 held earlier in the course of the morning session**, Dr. Manazir Ahsan**, Network Co-Chair, introduced the National Meeting. He said that entering a new Millennium was an important opportunity to focus on the agenda for inter faith work in the coming years and for reflecting on the tasks facing Network member bodies as well as the Network itself. The meeting would be exploring ways of developing inter faith relations to response to new challenges, building on what has been achieved so far. It would be a chance for reflection on questions such as:

- How has the inter faith situation changed in recent years?
- What are the new challenges for organisations in the inter faith field?
- Are there particular dangers to be faced and pitfalls to be avoided?
- Are there new initiatives which need to be taken?
- Do we need to make changes in our organisational structures for inter faith work?

He said that at past meetings the main focus had been on outside speakers with expertise on particular topics. By contrast, this meeting was designed to be a more participatory one, drawing on the extensive experience and knowledge of inter faith work of member organisations. To some extent, the interests and concerns of the different categories of Network member bodies overlap. However, there are also issues which are specific to organisations in each particular category. For this reason, after lunch, representatives of member bodies would be meeting separately, by category, for structured discussion before returning for a shared plenary session. The opening plenary session was intended to provide a picture of the current inter faith scene as a context for the day's discussions. He then invited **Brian Pearce**, Director of the Inter Faith Network, to offer a survey of the issues which need to be addressed.

Dr Ahsan thanked Mr. Pearce for his presentation and then invited two respondents to offer their reflections. The first speaker was **Dr Sapna Shah**, a young member of the Jain community, who took part in the Millennium event on 3 January. The second speaker was **Iqbal Sacranie**, until recently Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain, another

participant in the 3 January event. There then followed a brief plenary discussion before lunch.

After lunch representatives of the Network's member bodies met separately, by category of membership, for discussion before returning for a shared plenary session. **Bishop Tom Butler**, Network Co-Chair, invited the facilitators for each of the separate category meetings to report on the key points from those discussions: **Indarjit Singh** on the meeting of representatives of faith community representative bodies; **Rabbi Jacqueline Tabick** for the national inter faith organisations; **Angela Jagger** for local inter faith organisations and **Dr Ataullah Siddiqui** for educational and academic bodies. There was then further plenary discussion before the meeting was closed by **Bishop Tom Butler**.

Inter Faith Relations in the UK:
The Agenda for the Next Decade

Brian Pearce, Director, Inter Faith Network for the UK

Background

Today we are thinking about the inter faith agenda for the <u>next</u> decade. But we can first recognise, with some satisfaction, the substantial progress in fostering positive inter faith relations over the <u>last</u> decade, to which so many organisations and individuals have contributed.

The Inter Faith Network was set up in 1987. By then, inter faith relations were already developing both nationally and locally. But the Network established, for the first time, formal links between the full range of organisations involved in this work, promoting a broader appreciation of the activities and concerns of those operating in different areas of inter faith activity. Very significantly, also for the first time, the national representative bodies of the major faith communities in the UK were brought together within a single framework.

Since 1987, the context for inter faith work has changed significantly. Not surprisingly, communities newer to this country were at first primarily concerned with the need to establish themselves and secure places of worship and community centres. In recent years, new organisational structures have emerged within these faith communities which are playing an ever fuller part in national life and in inter faith activity.

Relationships, often of personal friendship, have been established between leaders and members of the different communities which the Network links. And events involving the different faiths are increasingly common. It is now no longer a cause of surprise and congratulation simply that an inter faith gathering has been held!

Back in 1987, the significance of the <u>faith</u> dimension of relations between different communities was often ignored or challenged and many people were wary of inter faith encounter. There are still sceptics and even those who are hostile, but the importance of good inter faith relations is now much more widely accepted, both within faith communities themselves and by wider society. The Government has also become more aware of the significance of faith identity, and faith communities have developed ways of working together in their dealings with Government. One example is the success in persuading the Government to include a question on religion in the 2001 Census. Another is the readiness of the new Scottish Parliament to listen to the newly formed Scottish Inter Faith Council.

The Shared Act of Reflection and Commitment by the faith communities of the UK, which was held in the Houses of Parliament as part of the First Weekend celebrations of the new Millennium in many ways symbolised the progress which has been made in recent years, but on which we now need to build.

<u>The role of the Network</u>

The Network has helped to complement and strengthen the inter faith work of its member bodies. As you know, it links four categories of organisation: national representative bodies of the UK's main faiths; national, and local, inter faith organisations; and educational and academic bodies.

To some extent the interests and concerns of these different categories overlap, but there are also issues specific to the organisations in each particular category. As we enter a new phase in inter faith relations here in the UK, this National Meeting offers us a chance to identify the key issues which member bodies see the need to tackle now and ways in which the Network might help in this.

<u>A perspective from the Network office</u>

I have been invited to offer an initial setting of the scene from the perspective of the Network office. You may not agree with the picture I present but I hope that it will at least help to stimulate discussion. It will help us in thinking about the Network's own future agenda – and I do hope that it <u>will</u> have a future despite our difficult financial situation which was described earlier this morning – to know how you see the inter faith future. The priorities in the Network's own forward work programme are kept under review by the Executive Committee and they will want to consider whether there need to be changes in these as they follow up on to-day's discussion.

<u>Issues common to all member bodies</u>

What kind of issues will be on our shared inter faith agenda? It would take too long to catalogue and analyse these in detail. But let me first suggest, in broad terms, some of the tasks to which <u>all</u> our member bodies have important contributions to make.

These are:

(a) Countering religious prejudice and encouraging inter religious understanding, based on a better knowledge of our different religious traditions.

(b) Providing opportunities for fruitful encounter between people of different faiths;

(c) Carrying forward the search for common ground, particularly in shared values and exploring differences of view in how these should be applied in the circumstances we face to-day here in Britain;

(d) Working together to help build a better society and to care for the earth, in co-operation with all people of good will who share the same values, whether or not they have a formal religious commitment;

(e) Tackling particular issues of concern to the faith communities themselves, such as religious discrimination, the access of religious groups to community development funding and the challenges facing every community in handing on its religious tradition to the next generation.

(f) Finally, ensuring that the organisational arrangements for inter faith work are appropriate and adequately resourced.

Under these broad headings, you may wish to pick out specific issues which you wish to highlight.

Issues relevant to particular membership categories

Let me now suggest, drawing on conversations and correspondence with many of you over the last couple of years, some emerging issues of particular concern to each of the categories of Network membership. We need to examine the case for change, even where we conclude it is not needed. So I shall fly a few kites, even if you may want to shoot them down!

A   Faith community representative bodies

There are now 27 representative faith community organisations in membership of the Network drawn from nine traditions: Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian.

Three years ago our National Meeting focused on the need for each faith community to develop an "inter faith strategy". Questions posed then were:

a) Do faith communities have a clear understanding of the basis within their own traditions for inter faith dialogue?

b) Are they ensuring that their religious leadership is adequately prepared to deal with inter faith issues; and encouraging their members to reflect how they relate to those belonging to other religious traditions?

c) Are faith communities making effective use of the frameworks now available at a national level for inter faith consultation and co-operation and encouraging appropriate structures for this at a local level?

The question of how faith communities can best relate both to one another and collectively to the Government is coming under increased discussion.

Some see a developing case for more structured and regular meetings between national representatives of the different faith communities to discuss issues of mutual concern. Arguably, full advantage of the existing Network framework is not yet being taken by faith communities in a proactive way to raise issues of concern to them and, where possible, to evolve common policies, for example on religious discrimination where some complex and difficult issues are involved.

Should we, perhaps, set up within the Network a representative "forum of faiths" to help formalise and focus these exchanges? Over time there may be a wish to work towards an entirely new structure on the lines of a "UK Council of Faiths", but this probably lies some way ahead.

A more structured framework for consultation <u>between</u> our faith communities would have an impact on the way their relations are handled with the Government and with wider society. Since the Network was established there have been important developments in the way in which the Government relates to faith communities. In some cases consultative mechanisms are needed for particular projects or events, as with the Millennium, or for particular policy areas, such as urban regeneration or education.

The Inner Cities Religious Council (the ICRC) was formed, within what is now the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, with the help of the Network in 1992. The Government decided at the time that its membership should be confined to those faith communities with a substantial presence in inner city areas: Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh. So far this has remained the position.

The Lambeth Group* was set up in 1996, bringing together representatives of the Government, of the same five faith communities represented on the ICRC, and of a variety of public bodies with an interest in the Millennium celebrations. Discussions have recently been initiated in the Group about whether, and how, its experience of co-operative consultation between the Government and faith communities might inform consultative models for the future. The Home Office also has a strong interest in these issues.

The Network has been represented at meetings both of the ICRC and the Lambeth Group. In discussing future structures, questions will come up about the future role of the Network itself and of bodies like the ICRC. What would our faith communities like to see emerge from these conversations?

Both in the case of how the faith communities relate to one another <u>and</u> in the case of how they relate to Government, issues will arise about the range of faith communities that should be represented and about the appropriate ways for them to be represented, particularly where no single body can speak for the whole of a faith community.

Alongside these issues relating to multi-lateral discussion and consultation, we need to consider how to deepen dialogue between <u>particular</u> faith communities, especially where there is a difficult legacy of past conflict, mistrust and misunderstanding. There are often important issues specific to particular relationships and which multi-lateral dialogue cannot address satisfactorily. The work of the Council of Christians and Jews for example, has made it possible to carry forward at a deep level the Jewish-Christian dialogue. Is there a need for <u>more</u> structured dialogues on a <u>bilateral</u> basis?

Inter faith organisations

National <u>and</u> local inter faith organisations should, by definition, be concerned with those issues which exercise our faith communities. But there are also particular questions about the way they develop their work. Let me now identify some of these.

* <u>Note:</u> The Lambeth Group is the name used for the Churches and Other Faiths Sub-group of the Millennium Co-ordinating Group of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

B   National inter faith organisations

In Network membership there are now 13 inter faith organisations which operate beyond a local level, mostly on a national basis. Most are based on <u>individual</u> membership, while the Network is based on <u>organisational</u> membership. Many of us here will belong to one or more of them. Some were founded 50 years or more ago, but there is a growing number of inter faith organisations at both an international and national level. A recent newcomer, for example, is the United Religions Initiative, which is to have a branch here in the UK.

Some have a particular functional focus, for example that of the World Conference on Religion and Peace is on international peace and justice. Some focus on particular relationships, for example the Maimonides Foundation. Others, such as the World Congress of Faiths, have a more general brief,. Some are rooted in one faith community, while open to others, such as the Christians Aware Interfaith Programme and Westminster Interfaith. Some, like the new Scottish Inter Faith Council, cover particular parts of the UK. Others are national "chapters" of international inter faith organisations, such as the British Chapter of the International Association for Religious Freedom.

All of these organisations face the challenge of expanding their membership, both in terms of numbers and in terms of participation from across different faith communities. In addition, they are all wrestling with how to attract more young people to participate in their work, which is a major issue on the inter faith agenda for <u>all</u> of us.

From the outset, the intention has been that the Network should complement and support (and <u>not</u> duplicate) the work of these national inter faith organisations. Each is independent of the others and is likely to want to remain so for the foreseeable future. But inevitably there is the possibility of there being competition and overlap, perhaps unwittingly, in their work.

Would it be helpful to have meetings, say once a year, perhaps hosted by the Network, of the inter faith organisations operating at national level in the UK, so that each is better informed of the others' work? A forum for the exchange of information and for discussion on future plans might help organisations to avoid undesirable duplication and to sharpen the focus of their work.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

A special word about Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Network is the Inter Faith Network <u>for the United Kingdom</u>, but it is important that inter faith developments keep up with political devolution. The Northern Ireland Inter Faith Forum became a member of the Network in 1995 and the Scottish Inter Faith Council, established last year, became a member at this morning's AGM. Preliminary steps have been taken towards an Inter Faith Council for Wales. We shall need to make sure that the links between inter faith work in the different countries of the UK are maintained so that our experiences can be shared to mutual benefit.

C   Local inter faith organisations

The Network has always seen inter faith work at local level as being of the utmost importance. A few pioneering local inter faith organisations have been in existence for 25 years or more. In recent years there has been an ever increasing number of local initiatives, including some in less religiously diverse areas where there is nonetheless an interest in addressing the issues posed by our multi faith society.

Some local inter faith organisations see themselves as representative bodies - local "councils of faith"; others are more informal in character. Some focus on issues in the public arena; others more on tackling prejudice and ignorance, developing greater mutual understanding and providing an opportunity for reflection on the content of different religious traditions and on the spiritual journey of the participants. Some attempt to combine both roles. In a number of places a representative council of faiths has been established alongside an existing more informal group and their work is complementary and co-operative. Local groups may include a wider range of faith traditions than the 9 that the Network links directly at present.

There are particular challenges in large conurbations, where there may be a need for metropolitan bodies on a representative basis, with separate local groups relating to more manageable areas for inter faith activity. Arguably, there is a general need for many more informal groups at a neighbourhood level.

It is clear from reports at Network meetings that many local initiatives have been finding it hard to sustain their initial impetus and face the need constantly to refresh their membership from across the faith communities in their area and to reinvigorate themselves.

Last month the Network, in association with the ICRC, held a conference in Birmingham which looked at the development of representative local inter faith structures to provide a better basis for relating to local authorities and other public bodies in their area. The report will be available soon. Speakers from both local government and local inter faith groups emphasised the opportunities which now exist for faith communities to develop a more public role, but also recognised that it can be difficult to secure effective and authoritative representation.

One question which arises is whether there should be a conscious effort to establish a "model" for local "councils of faith". Alternatively, is the present more flexible position preferable, leaving the character and form of local inter faith initiatives to be determined locally?

At present, some 37 local inter faith organisations belong to the Network as member bodies in their own right. They are <u>not</u> branches of the Network. But we are now in touch with 80 local inter faith initiatives in all.

As the number of local inter faith structures continues to grow, will we need to review again the criteria for membership of the Network (set out in one of the papers for this morning's AGM)? Some years ago the possibility was discussed of setting up an "Association of Local Inter Faith Organisations" or of more informal initiatives having associate, rather than full, Network membership. Should the Network try to bring into formal membership <u>all</u> local inter

faith initiatives as they emerge or should the focus of Network membership be primarily on the more formal councils of faiths?

From its early years the Network has arranged "link" meetings in different parts of England for those involved in organising local inter faith initiatives to exchange views and ideas and discuss common problems and concerns. With steps towards devolved Government in the English regions, do we need to alter the format of these "link" meetings to make them even more useful? Should they become larger regional gatherings, with participation drawn from all the categories of Network membership?

D   Educational and academic bodies

When the Network was being set up it was clear that the development of multi faith Religious Education and the work of a number of academic centres were making significant contributions to inter faith work in Britain and a separate membership category for educational and academic bodies was established. 10 organisations now belong to this.

The Network has mutual affiliation with the Religious Education Council for England and Wales and has not duplicated the Council's membership in its own membership. In the field of RE the National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (NASACRE) (in England) and the SHAP Working Party on World Religions in Education also belong to the Network. Many individual RE specialists have made major direct contributions to inter faith work at both national and local level.

Some higher education institutions (such as the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in Birmingham) joined the Network at the outset. But since 1987 there has been an expansion in the range of academic centres developing work relevant to inter faith issues.

Some organisations within faith communities with a strong educational dimension to their work (such as the Islamic Foundation) became member bodies partly to provide a more rounded pattern of faith community links. Again, there is now a larger number of faith community organisations with an academic or educational character.

The Network has itself taken initiatives in the educational and academic fields. These include its collaboration on the multi-faith directory project with the University of Derby; joining with the RE Council and NASACRE in convening a consultation on collective worship in schools; and commissioning reports on the handling of student religious identity in higher education institutions and on inter faith issues in RE. Are there other specific issues which the Network should be taking on to its own agenda?

The links which this category of Network membership has provided have been valuable but its role within the Network has perhaps been less obvious than in the case of the other three categories and the criteria to be adopted for considering membership applications, and for encouraging these, have been unclear, but there is now a larger constituency of potential members.

So some questions to ask are: What role do organisations in this category see themselves as playing within the Network? And do <u>they</u> value the links it provides? Should the Network's links with educational and academic bodies be different, perhaps with their having an associate membership or a purely advisory role?

<u>Conclusion</u>

To conclude. I hope that this survey from the perspective of the Network office has been of some help in setting the scene. There will obviously not be sufficient time today for us to answer all the questions I have posed. Rather they are offered to provoke discussion. But it would be helpful to know whether you think they <u>are</u> ones we need to be addressing in the next few years.

After lunch, we are asking each category meeting to discuss the following broad questions:-

    (a) What are the key issues which are going to be on the inter faith agenda over the next few years?

    (b) Are there particular priorities for the contribution which the Network itself might be able to make in helping to tackle them?

    (c) Is there a need for organisational changes to make inter faith work more effective?

Today is only a first discussion within the Network of these questions and there will be further consultation on the way ahead in the months to come.

The contribution of every member body to the development of inter faith relations in this country is of tremendous importance. We are helping to shape our society in important ways, in the hope of leaving a legacy of harmony and understanding to our children and grandchildren.

Reflections by Dr Sapna Shah of the Jain community

Although it has been established for a number of years, I only really became aware of the work carried out by the Inter Faith Network in November of last year. At the time I had been asked by my uncle, Dr. Natubhai Shah, to contribute a short speech on Jain values at the January Millennium celebration of faith at the House of Lords.

My own reaction and those of the people around me was of great enthusiasm, as it would be an opportunity to educate, and be educated, on fundamental, yet clearly important, issues within the different religions, all under one roof and all within one morning.

What pleasantly surprised me was that in <u>general</u> terms, the messages the various religious groups were putting across were similar, in terms of promoting religion in general, living in peace and harmony with each other and the environment and educating the next generation in terms of religion, whilst maintaining those issues which characteristically define each religion.

The event was an important step and set a foundation upon which we can build. Some of the goals that I see for the next five years, include:

(1) Greater awareness amongst the younger generation of the existence of inter faith organisations

(2) Removing prejudices amongst all generations regarding issues specific to individual religions

(3) Promoting acceptance amongst religions of the needs and requirements of other religions

(4) Preserving religion and faith in general

(5) Expansion of the Inter Faith Network

1 and 2 The Younger Generation

From as early as school age, children should be aware of the multicultural society we are living in. They are of the impressionable age where schooling, parental advice, media, the internet all contribute to their future opinions and prejudices, and it is through these media that the latter may be obliterated.

My own generation would benefit from greater publicity through events like the one hosted in January, to enable not only the religious leaders of the faiths to contribute to the running of inter faith events and organisations but also the individuals within each community to have a say, and an opportunity to be educated. The greatest change will only come about when communities <u>as a whole</u> understand the work of the Network and have their fears (for example, the loss identity of individual religions) addressed and eradicated.

(3) Promoting acceptance

From a Jain perspective, although many of our beliefs show similarities and overlap with those of other religions, a specific issue of particular importance to us has been the notion of *ahimsa,* translated as 'non violence', which may be practised via numerous routes but in particular by the promotion of vegetarianism. This is something we would like to see developing further over the next five years. The concept of *ahimsa* may also be extended to include preservation of the environment and animal welfare.

(4) Preserving Religion

This is clearly of importance and relevance to all the religious groups and therefore the responsibility of them all as well. With the opening of specific schools aimed at teaching children about religion and also the availability of degree courses in religions like Jainism, education is certainly a priority.

An issue which remains contentious and very difficult to resolve is that of marriage between people from different religions and backgrounds. Although not widely accepted within communities it nevertheless does occur. Although I am well aware of the strong feelings this issue raises amongst the individual religions, I feel that those involved should not feel excluded from the work of the Inter Faith Network. Communities may in the future be able to welcome members of their faith with their spouses, giving such couples the opportunity to live in a home where two religions are practised rather than one in which <u>no</u> religion is practised.

The children of such parents may also benefit from the work of the organisation – an organisation which does not promote amalgamation of the various religions but would show this generation a united path of acceptance and tolerance arising from the crossroads of different religions.

(5) Future Work

It would be good to see representatives from different religions being invited and welcomed to attend some of the key festivals occurring within the year amongst different religions and perhaps the Network might help negotiate this.

It would also be nice to see expansion of the Inner Cities Religious Council to include membership by other faith communities including the Jains whose community continues to grow, and whose recognition as an individual religious body would be a welcome step forward.

Many societies have separate youth groups to enable the younger generation to become actively involved in the running and organisation of their religious and cultural events. Perhaps for the future it may be possible to set up a similar Inter Faith Youth Society, whose members could meet at functions, seminars, workshops and organised events. Apart from the obvious advantages this would have for the future of the Inter Faith Network, it would also bring together a generation who have grown up in a mixed cultural society and who are perhaps more receptive of change.

Conclusion

Although a lot of work has been done to bring the religions together, there is potential for development and progress over the next five years. Encouraging the youth, with guidance from the religious leaders and the Inter Faith Network should be on the agenda to help bring about these changes.

Reflections by Mr Iqbal Sacranie,
former Secretary–General of the
Muslim Council of Britain and Chair of Muslim Aid

I have been helped by having available to me an advance text of Brian Pearce's opening contribution. I do not plan to offer answers to all his questions, but will perhaps add some questions of my own! Brian gave a very useful survey of the different aspects of the work of the Network and its member organisations. It was indeed a major achievement to bring together within the Network such a wide range of different groups within a single framework. Those of us involved in its early years were not sure how it would turn out in years to come, but the Network, together with its member bodies, has made a truly significant contribution to the development of inter faith relations in this country. The participation of the different faith communities and their coming together for the first time has been simply remarkable. The efforts of the Network's office bearers, particularly of its Director, Brian Pearce, and Deputy Director, Dr Harriet Crabtree, have contributed much to its success. Speaking from my experience as the first Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain, I know how delicate a task it has been to bring together in that Council the various strands of the Muslim community and it is even more of a challenge to bring together different faith groups with different backgrounds and different agendas.

We cannot force the pace in inter faith relations. It is very important to proceed with care in the early days and to make it clear that inter faith activity does not involve the mixing up of faiths or compromising on issues of principle. There is a need to recognise the integrity of each tradition and to respect the sensitivities of different faith communities as we move forward in our inter faith work.

Over the last 15 years, there have been changes within faith communities with developments in their organisational structures. There have also been changes in society, including changes in the attitude of Government to faith and to faith communities. This has come about partly as a result of the willingness of the faith communities to co-operate and communicate with one another, which has in turn made the Government more willing to recognise the role which faith communities can play in society.

We live in a secular society and have to recognise that fact. The role and importance of faith communities is not widely recognised in our society. We have to consider how wider society views our faith communities and to be ready to work with others to help build a better society. But we must be true to ourselves and must make it clear that we are as entitled as any sector or group of society to be part of the process of public consultation and decision making.

As we move forward over the coming years, we need to be ready to face the need for changes to meet the demands which are now being made on us. A variety of organisational models and relationships will need to be explored, and not just those to be found in the UK, but also models from, for example, the United States, where groups have been working successfully to bring issues of faith on to the public agenda.

There is a need to review the present pattern of inter faith relationships and organisations, both in terms of multi-lateral and bi-lateral relationships, and to look at the way relationships are handled between the Government and faith communities. Only recently, there has been some news of plans to form a Parliamentary Inter Faith Group. This group should bring

together all faith communities. The Inter Faith Network should play an important role in its formation. It is important not to duplicate work between different organisations at national and local level but there is a need for bodies which can play a representative role in a positive and constructive way.

The Network will need to keep under review its membership pattern and to keep up with changes in the organisational patterns in faith communities. I am very pleased that The Muslim Council of Britain has now joined the Network. The MCB concluded that it would be appropriate for the Council, with its wider role, to join in place of the UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs. There is also a need to find ways and means of involving younger people more directly in inter faith work. As Sapna Shah brought out in her presentation, youth can make a vital contribution and carry forward the constructive work of the Inter Faith Network.

I look forward to the discussion at to-day's meeting.

In the subsequent discussion the following points were made:-

a) It is important for faith communities to reach out and help tackle together the problems of wider society. For example, the levels of use of drugs and of crime are on the increase and there is a need to work out a shared strategy to deal with these. Education for children both in school and within faith communities is of vital importance.

b) The challenge of secularism, individualism and corrosive materialism affect younger people and faith communities need to combat these. In many ways shopping is the new religion and shopping malls are consciously designed as the new cathedrals of our society.

c) It is difficult for faith communities to overcome the indifference and hostility of the materialist culture. Faith groups and inter faith organisations need to make better use of the media and in particular the radio to reach those estranged from religious faith.

d) Those involved in inter faith work already need to spread the message of inter faith understanding more widely within their own communities of their communities, to increase the sensitivity of their members to inter faith issues and to encourage the practice of dialogue. It is particularly important to provide a proper place for younger people in inter faith activity.

e) Faith communities need to combat extremism and closed minds within their own ranks.

f) There needs to be a willingness to widen the circle of dialogue and to bring other groups within it.

g) A variety of initiatives are now being taken, financed from public funds, to review the ways in which public services meet the needs of different faith communities. It is important for these exercises not to ignore resources which already exist.

MAIN POINTS FROM DISCUSSIONS IN MEETINGS BY CATEGORY

The following notes record the main points made by participants in the four separate discussions after lunch, in which representatives of the Network's member bodies met by category of membership. They do not constitute a set of agreed recommendations.

Faith Community Representative Bodies: Meeting Facilitated by Indarjit Singh

a) The Network has played a valuable role in building up personal relationships of friendship and trust between leading members of different faith communities. It has provided a 'safe place' for speaking frankly to one another about matters of mutual concern.

b) Faith communities have an important role to play in the mainstream of society. It is therefore important for there to be ways of representing their concerns to national and local government. New opportunities for this are emerging, as in the case of the new Greater London Authority.

c) The Network has seen its role as facilitating this process rather than claiming 'to speak on behalf of' faith communities. At the same time, when the communities can speak with a united voice they have more influence, for example, in the discussions about including a 'Faith Zone' at the Millennium Dome, and in the discussion on whether to include a question on religious identity in the 2001 Census.

d) It is important that the faith communities retain their independence and can press their own agenda without being co-opted by Government on its terms. Neither the Inner Cities Religious Council nor the Lambeth Group is fully independent of Government, unlike the Network. Within the Network faith communities meet as equals on their own ground.

e) One option for consideration would be to make more structured arrangements for regular 'pre-meetings' before meetings take place in a Government forum so that faith communities have an opportunity to agree on a common line where they can. But there would be advantage in not leaving these discussions until immediately beforehand.

f) Another possibility would be to set up a more structured 'Forum of Faiths' within the Network. The faith communities would need to see this as a safe and trusted forum for their discussions together and it would need to recognise areas of disagreement and difference as well as areas of agreement.

g) Where a faith community has a particular problem of its own it is helpful if other communities can speak up in public on its behalf. For this to be possible there is a need to brief other communities on the problems which the faith community has. The Network has enabled this to happen to some degree but a 'Forum of Faiths' would provide a more structured context.

h) More generally there is a need to move on from dialogue between faith communities to co-operative action in which they work together to demonstrate that faith has a key role in daily life and in our shared citizenship.

i) While there would be value in more bilateral dialogue to remove misunderstandings in particular relationships, it is important that this should not detract from multilateral dialogue. It would not be appropriate for the Network to initiate bilateral dialogues directly, but it could offer help and encouragement with this.

j) There is value in symbolic events such as the shared faith communities Millennium event held at the beginning of the year, in which faith communities can come together to underline the values which they hold in common.

k) The involvement of young people is crucial for the future of all faith communities. Too often young people are ignorant about their own faith. This is a problem which faith communities have to tackle themselves. At the same time it is important to involve young people in inter faith work. The significance for young people in particular of the Internet needs to be recognised.

l) It is very important that children are taught their own religion but also respect for other faiths.

m) There are considerable difficulties with the legal framework for collective worship in schools.

n) Faith communities need to combat the view that religion is outmoded and outdated and to help people see faith traditions in 21st century terms.

o) In today's society there is a growing interest in a more generalised spirituality to the detriment of the historic faith traditions.

p) The media can often be hostile to religion and shows a lack of understanding of it. For example, at the celebration of Diwali organised by the Hinduja Foundation at Alexandra Palace the press focused, not on the religious content of the event and its emphasis on tolerance and communication between faiths and cultures, but on the dress which Mrs Blair was wearing!

q) There may be a role for the Network to arrange further meetings with the media to try to secure a better understanding of the place of faith in today's society. There is a need for a more constructive response to the opportunities which do present themselves to bear witness in the media.

r) Only a relative minority have a knowledge of inter faith activity and what is being done to improve inter faith relations in Britain. There is a need to draw more people into inter faith activity and to publicise it more.

s) Ideally, the Network would do far more, including for example, establishing a research unit to examine issues of particular concern to faith communities collectively. But there are clear limits on what can be done given the major difficulties in resourcing the Network to undertake even its present level of activities. There are also limits on the extent to which faith communities at both national and local level can identify representatives who have the time to participate in inter faith activity.

t) It is important to offer help to the Network office in seeking more funding.

National Inter Faith Organisations: Meeting Facilitated by Rabbi Jacqueline Tabick

Following responses to an invitation from the facilitator to those present to give a brief account of the role and work of their organisations, the following points were made:

a) There are an increasing number of inter faith organisations, both national and international. In many ways this is a positive development, increasing the scope and amount of inter faith activity. But it does mean that there are dangers of overlap and duplication.

b) It is important for inter faith organisations to draw new people into inter faith work and there is a particular need to find ways of involving more young people. Some organisations have found that arranging visits abroad or exchange programmes are a good way of attracting young people and making them aware of inter faith work and opportunities.

c) All inter faith organisations face problems of resourcing in terms of funding and active participants. Fundraising can itself be a good way of publicising the work of an organisation.

d) There is a need for more exchange of information between different national inter faith organisations about their work. The present meeting itself was helpful in this process. It would be useful for the Network to arrange an annual meeting at which representatives of these organisations could come together to share information and experience.

e) The Inter Faith Network has an important role in facilitating member bodies as they tackle different aspects of the inter faith agenda.

f) While the work which the Network has done in its dealings with Government Departments and national public bodies has been valuable, it is important for it also to provide more help for local inter faith initiatives and support for the diverse range of local groups.

g) More generally, there was agreement on the importance of education, the need to support the work of local SACRE's and to help children develop an understanding of different faiths, of common values and of inter religious issues, including the history and development of different faiths.

h) In terms of education in its wider sense, the media, and especially the radio, have an important role to play.

i) Inter faith marriage is a difficult and sensitive issue but there is a need to develop strategies to ensure that young people who do marry across faith boundaries are not lost to their communities.

Local Inter Faith Organisations: Meeting facilitated by Angela Jagger

a) There needs to be flexibility in the models of local inter faith organisations so that the different needs of different localities can be met. Some local inter faith structures are quite formal and see themselves as representative bodies. Others are more informal. In some places, such as Leeds and Loughborough, different kinds of structure work alongside and complement one another. Where there is only a formal representative council of faiths which does not also offer opportunities for informal encounter, individuals can feel excluded.

b) The guidance in *The Local Inter Faith Guide* is valuable. It could perhaps be supplemented by offering drafts of model constitutions and building up a database of charities willing to give money to inter faith work. In this context, the usefulness of the publications of the Directory of Social Change listing trusts was noted.

c) There needs to be a two-way process between the Network office and local inter faith organisations. There needs to be feedback from the Network office to local inter faith organisations so that they know how issues and suggestions raised at national meetings are being pursued. There is a complementary need for feedback to the Network office on the experience of local inter faith organisations. Regional "link" meetings provide one instrument for this but they need to be supplemented in other ways.

d) Many local inter faith organisations are debating which religious groups should be included on a representative basis. Some would welcome clearer guidance from the Network on this, although it was recognised that this is an issue which ultimately has to be settled locally.

e) The issue of the "recognition" of faith communities by the Government at national, regional and local level is assuming greater importance. This is in terms both of the recognition of the significance of faith identity and of giving formal recognition to different faith groups and involving them in consultation and dialogue.

f) There are particular difficulties for faith communities in arranging representation at regional level where only one or two individuals can be nominated to represent faith communities of the region as a whole. This is a virtually impossible task. In some parts of the country a "sub regional" area may be the most effective unit on which to focus.

g) The growing opportunities, of which local inter faith structures can take advantage, for consultation and partnership between representatives of local faith communities and local government and other public bodies are welcome. At the same time, it is important also to maintain work on promoting mutual understanding between members of different faiths <u>and</u> understanding of those faiths among the wider community. This understanding can be fostered, for example, through exhibitions in libraries and work in schools.

h) There is scope for co-operative practical action by faith communities in meeting the needs of the local community, for example the work of the Curry Club in providing food to the homeless in Bradford. It is appropriate for there to be public funding for

projects involving faith communities in their community work and the Network should argue the case for this with Government.

i) There were conflicting views on the attitude to religion of young people. Some speakers suggested that they are more interested in opportunities to be more adventurous in understanding their faith identity and others that they are more attracted by a clearly defined set of beliefs.

j) More generally, the meeting emphasised the key role of education and of raising awareness within society as a whole of the importance of inter faith relations and of the contribution which faith communities can make to society.

k) The use of information technology needs to be handled carefully. Its advantages should be exploited but it is important not to establish a two-tier situation, dividing those who use it from those who do not.

Educational and Academic Bodies: Meeting Facilitated by Dr Ataullah Siddiqui

a) Educational and academic bodies have an important contribution to make to the work of the Network as a whole.

b) It would be valuable for the Network to organise a day conference for representatives from a variety of academic centres to discuss how they can best relate to the Network and also issues such as whether educational and academic bodies should continue to be in full membership of the Network or have associate membership.

c) Difficulties in operating the provisions in the 1988 Education and Reform Act dealing with RE and Collective Worship were noted and it was suggested that it would be helpful for the Network to keep these issues on its agenda, although there is a need to avoid duplication, for example between the Network and the work of the RE Council for England and Wales and the Scottish Joint Committee on Religious and Moral Education.

d) There is a need for a systematic approach to RE. There is a risk of giving young children a confusing "soup" of different religions and RE needs to be rooted in an understanding of the distinctiveness of different faith traditions.

e) The Network could be more proactive and approach teacher training colleges about the content of their training on inter faith issues.

f) Academic institutions can help in briefing on particular topics, for example on legal issues. They can help provide information on activities in other countries. The UK Inter Faith Network is in many ways unique with its emphasis on inter faith rather than multi-cultural issues and it should share its experience with other countries. Knowledge of experience elsewhere in long established pluralist societies in Africa and Asia would be beneficial to the Network.

g) The Network should consider commissioning research on relevant issues and the possibility of hosting an academic forum on inter faith issues, (such as the recent project on student religious identity in higher education institutions).

h) There is a need to bring together material on how different faith communities view specific issues such as poverty. Faith communities need to consider what more they can do in addressing "green" issues and environmental problems.

i) There is a need to educate faith community leaders in inter faith attitudes and to encourage them to use their pulpits to promote inter faith understanding.

j) Each faith community needs to produce guidelines on dialogue and an inter faith strategy.

k) It is important for the adult members of different faiths to learn about other communities through talks, leaflets and meetings.

l) The meeting noted the challenge to faith traditions posed by a wholly rational and science based understanding of reality and by the generalised interest in spirituality rather than commitment to particular faiths.

m) The Inter Faith Network has an important role in encouraging consultation between the Government and faith communities on public policy issues and it can act as focal point for dealing with issues of shared concern for example on questions on representation of faith communities in the House of Lords.

n) It is important for the Government not to make diversity into a political issue. Diversity needs to be celebrated, but on a bipartisan basis. All faith communities need to be involved in the national debate on the future shape of our plural society.

o) The validation of local inter faith groups through Network membership is important in dealings with local Government and other local public bodies. Now that both central and local government are more willing to fund particular projects, there is a risk of "pseudo" inter faith organisations looking for funds from these sources and there is a need for the Network to be ready to provide guidance on the authenticity of new initiatives.

CONCLUDING PLENARY SESSION

In the concluding plenary session chaired by **Bishop Tom Butler** there were presentations by **Indarjit Singh, Rabbi Jacqueline Tabick, Angela Jagger** and **Dr Ataullah Siddiqui** on the main points emerging from the discussions in the four category meetings. The following points were made by one or more participants in this plenary discussion:-

a) The issue of which faith groups should be included on a representative basis within the circle of dialogue is a difficult one. The religious landscape in Britain is complex. It was strongly urged that not all manifestations of religion are benign and that there is a need to face up to this. People naturally feel strongly about the way their own traditions are perceived and differences of view on how to relate to them can lead to personally painful exchanges, but it is important to find ways to discuss these and other difficult issues in constructive ways.

b) Some favour a fully inclusive approach to the involvement of different religious groups, while others are more cautious.

c) Some believe strongly that it would be inappropriate to bring some groups, such as Pagans, directly into the Inter Faith Network on a representative basis as faith community bodies. There are concerns about how the Network would then be seen by others. Arguably, it is for other inter faith organisations in membership of the Network which are largely based on individual membership to be more flexible in their approach.

d) It was noted that local inter faith organisations are free to decide their own membership policies. Experience at a local level in different kinds of dialogue could with advantage be fed back to the Network at national level.

In further discussion, it was <u>agreed</u> that the issue of which groups should be brought into the circle of dialogue will be a continuing issue on the inter faith agenda in the coming years.

The following additional points were also made in discussion:-

e) Without adequate funding it will not be possible for inter faith work to expand and develop as it should. There is a case for public funding for the promotion tolerance and harmony among different faith groups. It could be worthwhile looking to the United States for funding, given the larger amount of charitable funds available there.

f) A number of faith representatives are involved in the discussion of environmental issues in preparation for the 2002 review of the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. It is important for faith communities to contribute to the development of policies of sustainable development which help protect the planet.

In his closing remarks, **Bishop Tom Butler** said that, not surprisingly, the day had given rise to a "wish list" from each of the four category meetings. Not everything could be carried forward together at once. However, the suggestions made were valuable and the Network Executive Committee would review them at its next meeting. This National Meeting had been an important contribution to the debate about the way forward in inter faith work and the strong commitment of many organisations and individuals had been quite apparent in the

meeting, as had the companionship and honesty which the Inter Faith Network had developed over the years. He hoped that those present had been encouraged by the meeting to press on with their own work. He offered thanks to the speakers in the first plenary session, to all those who had contributed to the day's discussions and to the Network's staff for their work arranging their meeting.