

# Women's Inter Faith Initiatives in the UK: A Survey

Report by Fatheena Mubarak

for the Inter Faith Network for the UK



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A report by Fatheena Mubarak for the  
Inter Faith Network for the UK

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## **Foreword**

The Inter Faith Network for the UK was established in 1987 to promote good inter faith relations in the UK. Its member bodies include the representative bodies of the Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian faiths; national, regional, local and other inter faith bodies; and educational and academic bodies specialising in inter faith relations. With them it works to promote understanding and respect between the faith communities in the UK. More information about its work can be found at [www.interfaith.org.uk](http://www.interfaith.org.uk)

Across the last ten years there has been a very rapid increase in inter faith dialogue and cooperation in the UK with many new organisations and projects coming into existence. Yet the involvement of women within inter faith dialogues at senior level and in many local inter faith contexts remains relatively low. In May 2006 the Inter Faith Network therefore commissioned Dr Fatheena Mubarak to undertake a short research project looking at the pattern of women's inter faith initiatives. We are most grateful to Dr Mubarak for her work on this project and hope that her report, which highlights many examples of good practice, will inspire more initiatives of this important kind.

**Rt Revd Dr Tom Butler and Jagjiwan Singh**  
Co-Chairs, Inter Faith Network

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# Key points

## Scope of the survey

- 1 The project surveyed women's inter faith initiatives in the United Kingdom from late May to August 2006. Questionnaires were sent out to a number of different organisations in the UK and a total of 42 initiatives returned completed survey forms.
- 2 The project looks at some of the different types of inter faith initiatives set up and run by women, cites examples of 'good practice' throughout the report, reflects on the role of women in inter faith work more generally and provides a basis for further work in future on this important area.

## Growth in inter faith activity in the UK

- 3 Factors that have led to a growth in general inter faith activity in the UK include: increasing religious diversity; the impact of the work of faith organisations and inter faith organisations; increasing government interest in faith and inter faith issues; the impact of high profile examples of inter faith cooperation and inclusion; and the impact of particular events overseas and in the UK, such as the events of 11 September 2001 in the USA, military action in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the London bombings in July 2005.
- 4 Just as general inter faith activity has increased, there has been a rise in inter faith activity organised by and/or for women in recent years. 71% of responding initiatives have come into existence since 2002.
- 5 The factor that is most mentioned by women's initiatives as having influenced the development of their own group is the impact of events overseas and in the UK.
- 6 Women specific inter faith activity has also developed in response to positive as well as negative stimuli.
- 7 76% of responding women mention at least one challenge that women could face in fully participating in inter faith activity. Some of these challenges: are lack of time; lack of support from family and the wider community; and male attitudes or ways of working.
- 8 Despite the problems and challenges mentioned in the questionnaire returns, respondents are generally positive and enthusiastic about women's involvement in inter faith activity.

## Women's inter faith activity: types of initiatives

- 9 A majority of responding women's initiatives are from London, followed by North West England, Yorkshire and Humber and South East England.



- 10 Six broad types of women's inter faith initiatives emerge from the questionnaire returns: freestanding inter faith initiatives that have been set up by women with activities either for women only or for women and men; women's inter faith initiatives that are a part of a larger inter faith organisation; women's inter faith initiatives that are a part of a larger single faith organisation or initiative; women's inter faith initiatives that are a part of a secular organisation; women's initiatives that are not specifically inter faith in their aims; and inter faith initiatives for girls and young women within secondary and higher education.
- 11 A few groups do not fit into the above categories because their work is not specifically linked to women even though their activities are well represented by women.
- 12 The faith make up of initiatives varies: some women's initiatives include women from many faiths; others are specifically designed for followers of particular faiths; and some are open to followers of any faith including women with no formal religion.
- 13 A majority (67%) of the organisations include women of all ages in their activities, with a few exceptions of initiatives whose activities are specifically for women of a particular age group.

## **Aims and resources**

- 14 Responding initiatives vary in their aims, ways of working and resources, particularly in terms of staffing, funding, venues and premises.
- 15 Most of the initiatives have 'traditional' inter faith aims such as sharing common concerns and breaking down barriers, but with a focus on women and with the aim of empowering women within a context of faith.
- 16 A few responding bodies have more overtly social and political aims, while a few others have very specific, principally social, aims.
- 17 A half of all responding initiatives describe themselves as 'formally structured' with a committee and officers, while the other half of initiatives are informal in structure.
- 18 Over two thirds of the initiatives currently have no paid staff.
- 19 Almost a quarter of responding initiatives state that their inter faith activities take place in members' homes. However, in a majority of cases, the venue depends on the type of activity organised.
- 20 Only 10 organisations mention having a website and 8 a newsletter. Of the 10 organisations that have websites, only 3 highlight their women's initiatives; the rest focus on their general activities open to both sexes. The most frequently cited reason for not creating and maintaining a website is the difficulty in finding the expertise and funding
- 21 Over 25% of responding bodies have no funding other than members' donations, while 71% have some level of funding. The most regularly cited source of funding is the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund (FCCBF).

- 22 In most cases, funding received has been for small sums of money but some respondents highlight how far small grants could take them in promoting inter faith activity.
- 23 Over half of the respondents (59%) mention working in partnership with a variety of groups and organisations in conducting inter faith activity.

### **Activities and successful events**

- 24 Just as there is variety in the types of women's inter faith initiatives, there is also variety in the types of activities organised by these bodies for women.
- 25 The three most popular types of activities for women only mentioned in the survey returns are: shared meals; dialogue, discussions and meetings; and celebrations of special events and days.
- 26 Fundraising events and larger social gatherings held by the initiatives are generally open to both sexes as the aim is generally to raise money for charitable causes and/or to increase the profile of the initiative.
- 27 Some of the most successful activities have developed organically; women who have set up certain initiatives have, over time, discovered what works best for the communities they are trying to reach, in the areas in which they are living and working.

### **Observations and reflections**

- 28 A diverse and vibrant range of inter faith activities are being carried out by women in the UK. Their commitment and efforts will make a vital and powerful contribution towards developing mutual respect and understanding between faith communities.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Background

According to the last Census conducted in 2001, 76.8 % of the people in the United Kingdom identified themselves as having a religious faith.<sup>i</sup> The population of the UK is one of the most religiously diverse in Europe and it includes Baha'is, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Zoroastrians and people of other faiths and beliefs.

In this environment of growing diversity there has been an increase in inter faith activity to bring people of different faiths together in order to learn about each others' beliefs, to foster relationships of trust and friendship and to work cooperatively on social issues. This growth has been particularly rapid across the last ten years. It has been documented in such publications as the Inter Faith Network's report *Local Inter Faith Activity in the UK: A Survey*, published in 2003,<sup>ii</sup> and *The Local Inter Faith Guide*, the last edition of which was published in 2005.<sup>iii</sup> During the course of conducting research for these two publications, it became evident that just as inter faith initiatives in the UK have been rising, there has also been a growth in inter faith initiatives led by women primarily for women. This observation prompts some interesting questions, such as:

- What types of initiatives have been developed for women and what sorts of activities are they carrying out?
- Why have some felt the need to set up initiatives especially for women?
- How can women's involvement enhance inter faith activity?

This short report endeavours to open a window into this important, but often overlooked, area of women's inter faith activity in the UK. It is hoped that this will encourage others around the UK to develop inter faith projects involving women to help ensure that their voices are heard in the vitally important dialogue between people of different faiths.

## 1.2 Nature and scope of the survey and report

This report aims to flag up some of the very exciting women's inter faith activity being carried out in the UK. It is based on a survey commissioned by the Inter Faith Network for the UK and was designed and conducted over a period of approximately 10 weeks, from late May to early August 2006, by an independent researcher. Some of the preliminary findings of the survey were presented at the National Meeting of the Inter Faith Network on 3 July, 2006.<sup>iv</sup>

42 relevant initiatives are covered in this report. There are also a number of other projects which have been noted and contacted, but survey recipients have opted not to respond. These include a number funded through the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund, which are at very early stages of development (grants in the first round were awarded earlier this year).<sup>v</sup>

While the work of the Inter Faith Network for the UK principally covers the nine faiths mentioned in the opening paragraph of this chapter, this survey includes inter faith activity from a somewhat broader spectrum, reflecting the pattern of responses to the survey.

Due to the constraints of space, it has not been possible to mention every aspect of the inter faith activity recorded in the questionnaires and interviews, but, throughout the report every effort has been made to cite examples of good practice, as well as work that reflects the variety and the complexity of the types of initiatives in which women participate. It is hoped that the findings of this survey will help those wanting to develop further work in this area.

This report provides snapshots of women's inter faith initiatives in the UK at this point in time. Even though the research for the project was conducted relatively recently, it is important to stress that, in the words of some of the respondents, many of the women's initiatives are 'very organic' and constantly evolving to suit changing needs and circumstances. Therefore, the Inter Faith Network looks forward to receiving any updates from readers about changes or new developments taking place in this area of work.

### **1.3 Research aims**

The research aims could be summarised as follows:

- 1 to explore, in short compass, some of the different types of inter faith initiatives set up and run by women and look at examples of 'good practice' which can be useful to those developing these sorts of initiatives;
- 2 to invite reflections on the role of women in inter faith work more generally; and
- 3 to provide a basis for further work in future on this important area.

The project did not aim to do a quantitative analysis of numbers of women engaged in inter faith activity overall, to examine the experiences of women engaged in formal inter faith dialogue of a general kind (as opposed to inter faith activity with a focus on or membership restricted to women), to analyse how general inter faith initiatives are currently developing work to involve women more (although this did come up at points during the survey), or to do in depth research into the programmes of work of women's inter faith initiatives. Further research into these areas would be valuable. Likewise, the project did not set out to do a literature review on issues of women and religion or women and inter faith activity which are growing fields of academic study.<sup>vi</sup>

## 1.4 Methodology

### 1.4.1 Data Collection

#### 1. Letter and questionnaire

The survey began with the sending out an email, which described the project, with an attached short questionnaire. The emails were sent to:

- Member organisations of the Inter Faith Network
- Non-member local inter faith groups known to the Network
- Women's inter faith initiatives known to the Network

Additionally, a short call for information was sent out to projects involving women's inter faith activity funded under the first round of the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund. General inter faith and faith community bodies which were sent the questionnaire were asked to pass it on to relevant initiatives known to them. A total of 276 emails were sent out to the groups above. The number of completed questionnaires received was 42.

#### The Questionnaire

The questionnaire (reproduced at Appendix 1) that was sent out included brief questions about the aims, activities, structures and resources of each individual women's initiative. It also invited respondents to offer comment on women's role in inter faith activity, challenges they may face and any other observations they might wish to make on the level and pattern of women's participation in inter faith activity in the UK.

Telephone interviews were carried out in cases where people were unable to fill in the questionnaire, generally due to the lack of time. For purposes of clarification, questionnaire responses were sometimes supplemented by telephone follow up.

#### 2. Site visits/interviews

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with a representative from three different types of initiatives: Thames Gateway Women's Multifaith Forum; Leicester Christian-Muslim Women's Group; and the Faith Awareness initiative of Christians Aware in Leicester. In the case of Thames Gateway Women's Multifaith Forum, the interview was carried out at the residence of the Chairman, while interviews with representatives from the two initiatives in Leicester were conducted at St Philip's Church and the Christians Aware office respectively. Visiting these representatives from various initiatives in their own home or work premises created the opportunity to see the venues where initiatives sometimes took place, have access to their resources and get a better understanding of the work they do.

## 1.4.2 Data analysis

All information provided in the questionnaires to local inter faith organisations and other women's initiatives was entered in Excel spreadsheets. The quantitative data provided in this report in relation to questionnaire responses has been drawn from this data. All responses from face-to-face and telephone interviews were also entered in Excel spreadsheets wherever possible to maintain consistency and additional data supplied this way was entered in such a format as to enable data comparisons.

## 1.5 Acknowledgments

I am most grateful to Harriet Crabtree and her colleagues at the Inter Faith Network office who provided advice on contacts to approach for the survey, gave input into the shape of the survey, helped with some of the administration and commented on drafts of the report.

My sincere gratitude goes out to everyone who responded to the initial email that was sent out; particularly all those representatives from various women's initiatives across the UK who took time to fill in the questionnaire, and in many cases patiently answered subsequent questions; to Barbara Butler, Revd Diane Johnson and Mrs Lesley Mills for their hospitality during site visits; and to other individuals who responded to my email by providing me with useful suggestions and contacts. It is not surprising to see the impressive range of inter faith activity that is taking place in the UK when one considers the dedication and the passion with which such activities are undertaken by both women and men.

Thank you also to the Community Development Foundation for their assistance in contacting some of the initiatives funded through the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund.

A final debt of gratitude goes out to my family whose support has enabled me to carry out this exciting piece of research. Without their patience, encouragement and help, I would have, without doubt, had to forego the opportunity of being involved in this project.

Fatheena Mubarak, October 2006

i Information on the 2001 Census findings on religion can be found at: [www.statistics.gov.uk/focuson/religion](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/focuson/religion)

ii *Local Inter Faith Activity in the UK: A Survey*, Inter Faith Network for the UK, London, 2003.

iii *The Local Inter Faith Guide*, Second edition, Inter Faith Network for the UK in association with the Inner Cities Religious Council of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, London, 2005. A general overview of the history of inter faith activity in the UK can be found in *Religions in the UK: A Directory 2001-03*, edited by Paul Weller, Multifaith Centre at the University of Derby in association with the Inter Faith Network for the UK, 2001 and, in the context of a global overview, in *Pilgrimage of Hope*, Marcus Braybrooke, SCM, 1992.

iv The report of the National Meeting is titled: *Challenge and Opportunity: Changing Patterns of Inter Faith Engagement in the UK*, Inter Faith Network for the UK, 2006.

v Further information can be obtained from the Community Development Foundation (CDF), which administers this fund for the Department for Communities and Local Government. One such initiative is the *Women of Faith* conference organised by the Leeds Faith Forum which is to be held in 2007. For further information about CDF's own independent research in the Autumn of 2006 titled *Survey of Women in Faith Based Communities Receiving Grants*, refer to Appendix 3.

vi One important resource should, however, be drawn attention to in the context of this survey. Ruth Tetlow's unpublished master's dissertation *The Missing Dimension: Women and Inter Faith Encounter in Birmingham*, 2004 is an important piece of qualitative research that highlights, among other things, the growth of inter faith activity or 'encounter' in one geographical area of England in the past few decades. It discusses in some detail a range of women's initiatives in the Birmingham area and also contains reflection on aspects of women's engagement with inter faith issues.

## **Chapter 2: Growth in women's inter faith activity in the UK**

### **2.1 Introduction**

To discuss women's inter faith initiatives it is helpful first to set these against the backdrop of the increase in inter faith activity in general in the UK since the 1970s. One of the principal indicators of this has been the growth in the number of local inter faith groups and councils since 1973. The Inter Faith Network for the UK has documented this process and highlighted how a handful of initiatives in the mid 1970s have grown to over 220 multilateral local inter faith groups, councils and associations thirty years' later.<sup>i</sup>

Some of the reasons for this increase in inter faith activity are discussed in *Local Inter Faith Activity in the UK: A Survey*. These are cited below to place the findings of the current research in better perspective.

### **2.2 Factors that have led to the growth in general inter faith activity**

*Local Inter Faith Activity in the UK: A Survey* identifies six factors that have contributed to a rise in inter faith activity.<sup>ii</sup> Often interconnected, these factors help provide a basis and explanation for the significant interaction between communities and faiths taking place in the country.

#### **2.2.1 Increasing religious diversity in the UK**

An increase in the level of economic migration and refugee settlement, especially in the second half of the 20th century, has led to a rise in overall religious diversity. As the Census results of 2001 demonstrate, while Christianity remains the most sizeable faith tradition in Britain, approximately 1 in 20 of the population belongs to another faith tradition, such as the Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Zoroastrian or other tradition. Given this diversity in the religious composition of Britain, it is not surprising that inter faith activity has increased to promote better understanding between faith communities and encourage harmonious relations.

#### **2.2.2 Impact of the work of faith organisations**

The growing commitment to inter faith work by faith communities' organisations themselves is another factor mentioned in the Network's report of 2003.

#### **2.2.3 Impact of the work of inter faith organisations**

The Inter Faith Network for the UK, founded in 1987 to promote good inter faith relations and to link inter faith initiatives, has helped to develop local inter faith activity in general. So too have a growing range of inter faith organisations.

#### **2.2.4 Increasing Government interest in faith and inter faith issues**

Local and national government has attached an increasing significance to the involvement of faith communities in policy consultations and service delivery. At UK level, a Cohesion and Faiths Unit within the Department for Communities and Local Government plays a key role in this area.

#### **2.2.5 Impact of high profile examples of inter faith cooperation and inclusion**

Initiatives such as the Shared Act of Reflection and Commitment by the Faith Communities of the United Kingdom, held on 3 January 2000 in the House of Parliament, have helped encourage greater interest in inter faith cooperation.<sup>iii</sup> This has further encouraged new or strengthened existing local inter faith projects.

#### **2.2.6 Impact of particular events overseas and in the UK**

The Network's 2003 report highlights the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the USA and the military action in Iraq and Afghanistan as leading to an increase in recognition and acceptance of the importance of good inter faith relations as well as inter faith activity. More recently, the bombings in London on 7 July 2005 have also led to an increased awareness of the need for inter faith dialogue and activity between faith communities.

### **2.3 A parallel rise in inter faith activity organised by and/or for women**

Women's inter faith initiatives have also grown rapidly in recent years. A majority (71%) of the initiatives included in the survey say they have come into existence since the start of 2002. The factors mentioned above in relation to the rise of *general* inter faith activity have also had an effect on the growth of *women's* inter faith activity. For example, the impact of the work of faith organisations can be seen very clearly in two examples from the current research: the *Women in Faith* course run by the Islamic Foundation in Markfield, Leicestershire, and the Inter Faith Women's Group formed by the Chat Shop (Churches Acting Together in Arthur's Hill, Newcastle upon Tyne). The Islamic Foundation's six weekend *Women in Faith* course has been designed for Muslim women who are keen to get involved in inter faith work or who are already active in working with people of different faiths and want to develop this further. This initiative is discussed in greater detail later on in the report. The Chat Shop's Inter Faith Women's Group is a new initiative that commenced in July 2006 which came out of a need identified by the Chat Shop to reach out to other faith groups within the community; they aim to bring together Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh women to promote social cohesion in Arthur's Hill.

Similarly, the impact of increasing Government interest in faith and inter faith issues has affected women's initiatives. 11 initiatives noted funding from such programmes as the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund of the Department for Communities and Local Government or other Government linked funding sources such as the Community Chest.

Just as with general inter faith activity, so women's inter faith activity has been triggered in a number of cases by overseas and UK events. Of all the reasons discussed earlier for the rise in general inter faith activity, this is the one that is most mentioned by women's initiatives as having had an impact on the



development of their own group. These include a number which have come into existence in response to major international and national incidents such as St Alban's Women's Interfaith Group; the Interfaith Women's Group at the Touchstone Centre and the Women's Interfaith Network (in response to the events in the USA on September 11); 'Bridge of Peace' – Women's Federation for World Peace (in response to military action in Iraq); and One Voice – Keighley Women and Girls' Interfaith Group; the Society for Dialogue and Action, Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge (in response to the bombings in London in July, 2005); and a women's inter faith initiative in Dorking which came together in 2005 also in response to the bombings.

"We are an ecumenical discussion group in Dorking, representing 6 different Christian denominations. We have been running for about 15 years and meet monthly in each other's homes, where we share our responses to a variety of books of a spiritual nature. An article "Don't blame my religion" that appeared in the Dorking Advertiser on July 14th 2005, after the London bombings, prompted us to seek out and eventually make contact with the local Muslim woman who wrote the article. In the words of the report we later submitted to the local press, we "wanted to meet with local Muslim women to offer them the same friendship and understanding that we had developed within our Group." The Muslim woman and two of her friends gladly accepted our invitation to a simple lunch in the Quaker Meeting House in November 2005. This proved a very happy occasion and since then the Muslim women have come along to one of our discussion group sessions and talked to us about their lives as Muslim wives and mothers. We all agreed to continue to meet up at regular intervals to enable us to improve our understanding of each other's faiths."

An interfaith initiative in Dorking

## **2.4 Some reasons for the development of women specific inter faith initiatives**

The current research has a particular focus on women's inter faith initiatives and respondents have highlighted a range of reasons why they think that these are emerging. Their replies came in answer to three questions relating to women in inter faith activity in the final section of the survey form that respondents were asked to answer if they had the time and felt they would like to offer comment.

### **2.4.1 A specific, women's contribution to inter faith activity?**

One of the 3 questions respondents were asked in the final section of the questionnaire was:

"Have you any comments or suggestions on how women can play a role in fostering positive inter faith relations? Do you think that women have something quite specific/special to contribute to building good inter faith relations?"

Responses to this question on the role of women in inter faith activity elicited some interesting feedback. A majority of the respondents (71%) commented on the positive role that women play in inter faith activity. Some respondents highlight the particular *qualities* they believe women possess that encourage inter faith work. These qualities were described as sociability; hospitability; ability to empathise with others; sensitivity; non-adversarial/non-confrontational approach to solution finding; good listening skills;

informality; and ability to create a co-operative atmosphere. Although many men are involved in inter faith activity, some respondents saw men as being less flexible, more concerned with dogma and structure and less sensitive to the needs of others.<sup>iv</sup>

Some respondents also stressed how the *role* women play as mothers and nurturers can help them be good negotiators. One respondent noted that women are recognised as the centre of the family and felt that by reaching and involving women of different faiths, one could reach the whole family and then the community. Many responses to this question linked the special and valuable contribution women could make to building good inter faith relations to the sorts of qualities or roles noted above and saw it particularly in terms of contribution via women's initiatives.

It is, of course, important to note, however, that this particular survey did not engage as such with women who operate on a regular basis within mixed gender inter faith bodies and may play active roles within these. There are an increasing number of these of many faiths at national and local level and the views of some of these women may differ to some degree from those participating in initiatives covered by the current project.

#### **2.4.2 Negative prompts to create women's inter faith initiatives**

As well as positive reasons to start or join women's inter faith initiatives, respondents noted some negative factors which prompt this.

##### **a. Problems associated with general inter faith organisations being too formal and structured**

Several respondents mentioned that inter faith organisations involving men have a tendency to be formal and too structured for their liking.

"Our work overlaps and is complementary to the Oldham Inter Faith Forum, which aims to be a representative voice for the faith communities in Oldham. The women's initiative was set up because the Forum was not attracting many women. It was a bit too formal. The women's group gives an opportunity to find out a bit more about each other's faith in a separate environment and context and our structure is formed around us and our needs." **Oldham Women's Inter Faith Network**

##### **b. Feeling marginalized or uncomfortable in mixed settings**

In a number of instances respondents talked about starting initiatives for women because of a need to create safe, comfortable or more relaxed spaces for encounter.

"The Peace Meeting is exclusively for women. It has been an extremely important factor in building trust and creating a safe place and an environment where women can share their views openly and in depth." **Women's Peace Meeting, Birmingham**

Similarly, the women's initiative of Alif-Aleph UK stresses the importance of a space separate from men as vital in attracting and involving women in inter faith activity.

"Alif-Aleph is a group of British Muslims and British Jews committed to developing positive contacts between our communities as a 'good practice model' for all communities in the UK who find themselves divided, usually by conflicts from abroad spilling over to divide us in this country. The women's initiative aims to encourage Muslim and Jewish women who may feel marginalized or uncomfortable in a mixed surrounding to meet in a safe place. We came together originally because many women felt they could not 'be themselves' when taking part in inter faith events with men present." **Alif-Aleph UK**

Certain women's initiatives noted that the cultural and religious beliefs of some women limit their participation in inter faith activity when such activity is open to both men and women.

"The girls and women felt it would be easier to discuss and express opinions in a single sex group."  
**One Voice (Keighley Women and Girls' Interfaith Group)**

### c. Women's voices being unheard in mixed settings

In her important essay 'Feminism: the Missing Dimension in the Dialogue of Religions' in John D'Arcy May's collection *Pluralism and Religions: the Theological and Political Dimensions*, Ursula King explores the absence of women's voices in inter-religious dialogue and the lack of female religious leaders.<sup>v</sup> This absence of women's voices and female religious leaders is referred to by some respondents in their observations on general inter faith activity. They emphasise the fact that since faith leaders and representatives are usually men, women's voices are generally unheard. Again, this does not give women the opportunity to participate fully in inter faith activity, making the setting up of women-only initiatives a necessity rather than simply an option. A representative from One Voice (Keighley Women and Girls' Interfaith Group) expressed the following reasons for setting up a women and girls' group separate from the main organisation, Keighley Interfaith Group:

"Keighley Interfaith Group held a meeting for over 300 people of all faiths in the Shared Church after the events in London on the 7th of July, 2005. After this, the girls and women were keen to meet more often where they could speak for themselves, and not just listen to ministers and imams already chosen as speakers." **One Voice (Keighley Women and Girls' Interfaith Group)**

Women's under-representation in inter faith activity in general has been commented on by several respondents. However, the point that women's voices are often unheard in mixed settings and the need for this to be addressed in a women-only space has also been linked to women not being regarded as leaders in many faith traditions. A respondent belonging to the faith group Brahma Kumaris made specific

reference to this when she commented on the pattern and level of women's involvement in inter faith activity:

“Not enough women do participate in inter faith activities. I think this is because not enough women are in leadership positions in many faith traditions. Of course, women's involvement is rising, but a much bigger voice needs to be given to them in this context.” *Representative, Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University UK*

Interestingly, respondents did not, on the whole, comment extensively on how general inter faith initiatives could be made more welcoming to and inclusive of women but this is perhaps because by the nature of the survey sample, respondents were primarily women (and a few men) who were putting their primary energy into developing women's initiatives.

## **2.5 Other challenges faced by women**

76% of survey respondents mentioned at least one challenge that a woman could face in playing a full role in inter faith activity. Three of the most frequently cited problems were:

- lack of time
- lack of support from family and the wider community
- ways and attitudes of some men, which some respondents saw as hindering women's participation in inter faith activity

Therefore, just as a woman's position within the family is regarded as positive in enhancing her role as a negotiator, her role within the family could, concurrently, restrict her from participating fully in inter faith activity. A few respondents also mentioned that since most faith leaders are men, this makes it very difficult for women to act as representatives of faith communities.

Other problems mentioned by respondents included cultural and language barriers, lack of knowledge or misinformation about other faith groups and lack of leadership skills.

## **2.6 Women's attitudes to inter faith work in the future**

Although questionnaire respondents and interviewees who participated in this project highlighted several challenges and problems encountered by women who are involved in or trying to promote inter faith initiatives, they were positive in their attitudes towards the work they were promoting, and committed to reaching individuals and communities with openness and respect. They felt that they have much to offer as women of different faiths to help create a cohesive and mutually respectful society.

- i *Inter Faith Organisations in the UK: A Directory*, Third edition, Inter Faith Network for the UK, London, 2006 (p. 5).
- ii *Local Inter Faith Activity in the UK: A Survey*, Inter Faith Network for the UK, London, 2003 (pp 8-12).
- iii Further details can be found at: [www.interfaith.org.uk/rcommit.htm](http://www.interfaith.org.uk/rcommit.htm)
- iv This assumes that men and women are predisposed to certain types of behaviour because of their sex, which opens one of the most controversial debates in modern society of 'nature' versus 'nurture' in determining human behaviour. Opponents of this view would argue that by assigning to men and women certain characteristics and qualities, very little importance is given to social upbringing and environment in determining who we are and what we become and more importance is placed on biological determinism. Many feminists would regard this as an excuse to deprive women of participating in certain types of activities and subject to gender-stereotyping. Therefore, it is important to note that not everyone would agree with the view that women, from birth, are predisposed to certain characteristics and behaviour that make them more suited to certain types of work, which in this case is inter faith activity.
- v King, Ursula. 'Feminism the Missing Dimension in the Dialogue of Religions' in D'Arcy May, John ed. *Pluralism and the Religions: the Theological and Political Dimensions*, Cassell Academic, London, 1998 (pp 42-44).

## Chapter 3: Types of initiatives: response to the survey

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at where women's initiatives are taking place in the UK, how respondents have described their initiatives, which faiths are involved and the age of women involved in the various projects.

### 3.2 Geographical location of initiatives

The results of the survey discussed in this section are based on the responses in 42 questionnaire returns from various women's initiatives across the country. The geographical distribution of the initiatives is illustrated in the table below.

**Table 1: Number of women's initiatives by area**

Area	Number of women's initiatives
East of England	3
East Midlands	3
London	9
North East England	4
North West England	5
South East England	5
South West England	1
West Midlands	4
Yorkshire and Humber	5
Scotland	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>

As the table above illustrates, London has the most number of responding initiatives (22%) followed by North West England (12%), Yorkshire and Humber (12%) and South East England (12%). This could be because of the high degree of ethnic and religious diversity in these areas.

### 3.3 Description of the initiatives

The questionnaire asked responding bodies to describe their women's initiatives according to the following categories:

- i An inter faith group or multi faith forum
- ii A 'project' within another organisation
- iii A small dialogue group
- iv A committee or section of another organisation (such as a faith community body)
- v Other

**Table 2: Number of women's initiatives according to type of group**

Inter faith group	12
Dialogue group	2
'Project' within another org.	7
'Project'/Inter faith group	4
'Project'/Dialogue/Inter faith group	2
Dialogue/Inter faith group	3
Committee/Inter faith group	2
Other	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>

The 'other' category includes examples of projects that may not be thought of as 'inter faith' or 'women's inter faith' in their principal aims but which have an important inter faith dimension. These include: a Christian ecumenical discussion group which has developed a wider inter faith dialogue; a Sikh faith based organisation open to all faiths; a women's domestic violence advice service and refuge used by women of various faiths; a faith group; a community development voluntary organisation; a co-operative partnership; and a national inter faith organisation. The categorisation of initiatives is discussed in greater detail later on in this chapter.

### 3.4 Which faiths are involved?

The questionnaire asked which of the following faiths were involved in the activities organised by the women's initiatives: Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian faiths. Respondents were given space to add additional religions where there was any such involvement. The answers to this question are recorded in the following table.

**Table 3: Involvement of members of particular faith traditions in women's initiatives**

<b>Religion</b>	<b>No. of initiatives with members of this faith involved</b>
Muslim	35
Christian	33
Hindu	25
Jewish	21
Sikh	20
Baha'i	15
Buddhist	15
Jain	5
Quaker	5
Zoroastrian	4
Brahma Kumaris	2
Rastafarian	2
Unificationist	2
Pagan	1
Unitarian	1
Those with "no formal religion" <sup>i</sup>	1

Certain initiatives such as Alif-Aleph UK, the Leicester Christian-Muslim Women's Group, MoJoW and the inter faith volunteering project of the Asian Women's Advisory Service (AWAS) are designed to bring together women of specific faiths.

Some respondents also commented that they are keen to accommodate people of all faiths in their activities, but have been successful in attracting only the followers of a few.

### **3.5 Age of women participating in women's initiatives**

A majority (67%) of the organisations stated that they include women of all ages in their activities. The exceptions were groups whose activities were for women belonging to particular age groups (such as the Interfaith Council at the North London Collegiate School, MoJoW, in Cambridge, and the inter faith volunteering project at the Asian Women's Advisory Service) and initiatives whose activities had only attracted women of particular ages, even though they were keen to include women of all ages.

An interesting observation made by 4 respondents in relation to age, religious affiliation and involvement in inter faith activity was that, in their experience, women from Christian backgrounds involved in inter faith activity had a tendency to be older, generally over 45 years, while women from Muslim backgrounds involved in their inter faith activity were generally younger (between 20 and 40 years). Explanations for this included availability of time for younger and older women, the proportion of younger and older people in different communities and the ability to speak English among people from different communities. To explain the last point further, one respondent mentioned that some of the older members in minority communities may not be able to participate fully in an initiative's activities because they are not fluent in



English, which is the language that generally bridges different communities in the UK. However, it is important to stress that these comments are based on anecdotal evidence and not on any substantive research conducted on the subject.

### **3.6 Types of women's initiatives**

Six broad types of women's inter faith initiatives emerged from the returns:

- a Freestanding inter faith initiatives that have been set up by women with activities either for women only or for women and men
- b Women's inter faith initiatives that are a part of a larger inter faith organisation
- c Women's inter faith initiatives that are a part of a larger single faith organisation or initiative
- d Women's inter faith initiatives that are a part of a secular organisation
- e Women's initiatives that are not specifically inter faith in their aims
- f Inter faith initiatives for girls and young women within secondary and higher education

The following section of this chapter will take a closer look at the six types of initiatives and cite examples of women's groups whose work fit into these categories to gain a better understanding of how these groups work and organise their activities.

#### **3.6.1 Type A: Freestanding inter faith initiatives that have been set up by and specifically for women**

Initiatives that fall into this category have been set up specifically for women and have an autonomous existence, even though they may have close working relationships with other bodies or, in one case (Oldham), give input directly to these. Their activities are essentially for women although in some cases, activities that are organised are also open to men to raise the profile of the group and to be more inclusive of women who may not, otherwise, be able to participate especially if they are reliant on a male relative to accompany them, or, in the case of fundraising activities for example, to make the event more successful. Groups that fall into this category include:

- An inter faith initiative in Dorking
- Edinburgh Women's Inter Faith Group
- Leicester Christian-Muslim Women's Group
- Oldham Women's Inter Faith Network
- One Voice – Keighley Women and Girls' Interfaith Group
- St Alban's Interfaith Women's Group

- Thames Gateway Women's Multifaith Forum
- Women of Faith Coalition
- Women's Interfaith Network
- Women's Peace Meeting, Birmingham

Aspects of the origins and work of 3 of the initiatives in this category are highlighted below.

a. "[We are a] group of women from a number of different faiths and groupings within those faiths [who] meet each month in Edinburgh. Based in the Nicholson Square Methodist Church, the group includes Christians from the Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic, Scottish Episcopal Church and Methodist Church; Jewish – both Reform and Orthodox; Islamic; Hindu; Sikh; Buddhist; Baha'i; Brahma Kumari; and others who describe themselves as 'seekers'. There is a readiness to engage in dialogue that is facilitated by the absence of men, and the temperance stance of the Methodist Church makes the venue suitable for women of other faiths with similar views. Each month we discuss an issue that all find relevant after a short reflection led by women of one faith, and we conclude our time of fellowship and discussion with a further reflection from the same faith. Each meeting opens with sharing refreshment in the form of a cup of tea and finger food, for which each participant brings something to share. This gives due prominence to the fellowship aspect of the gatherings." **Edinburgh Women's Inter Faith Group**

b. "We came together originally because of our concerns about the impact of the Thames Gateway developments on our area. In April 2000, the Mothers' Union convened a forum to discuss issues of main concern. Over 70 women attended and between them represented many different faith communities. It soon became clear that there were many aims in common, that groups could work together and, by doing so, could combine resources to best effect. A representative forum was appointed which meets at least once every two months. Guest speakers from other groups give the benefit of their community experience. Members have been invited to join the committees of several other organisations and to attend relevant seminars. Thus the Forum has become a recognised resource in the community." **Thames Gateway Women's Multifaith Forum**

c. “The Women of Faith group (which later became the Women of Faith Coalition) was drawn together in 2002 as a result of initial discussions at the United Nations Sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women in New York. Here, it became evident that very little attention was given to the impact of religion and spirituality in general. Chapter 2 of the ‘Global Framework’, of the United Nations Beijing Platform for Action mentions women and religion, women and the family, the barriers facing women, that different cultural and religious differences exist and that women play a critical role in the family. Bearing this in mind, and the fact that for women of faith their religion is the bedrock of their lives which shapes their attitudes, the purpose of our meetings is to work together for the advancement of women, stressing the fundamental unity of thought in the love of God, from whichever faith we come.” **Women of Faith Coalition**

### **3.6.2 Type B: Women’s inter faith initiatives that are a part of a general inter faith organisation**

A growing number of general inter faith organisations are developing women’s inter faith projects or groups to enable more engagement of women in their work. Some of these, like Alif-Aleph and the Scottish Inter Faith Council, are at a national level and others, like Interfaith Milton Keynes, are locally focused.

- Women’s initiative, Alif-Aleph UK
- Women’s initiative, Bradford Trident – Trident Area Faith Forum
- Women’s initiative, Interfaith Milton Keynes
- Women’s initiative, Huddersfield Interfaith Council
- Women’s initiative, Merseyside Council of Faiths
- Women’s initiative, Middlesbrough Council of Faiths
- Women’s initiative, Preston Faith Forum
- Women’s initiative, Scottish Inter Faith Council
- Women’s inter faith bridge-building course, Society for Dialogue and Action

The women’s initiatives of Bradford Trident – Trident Area Faith Forum, Merseyside Council of Faiths and Middlesbrough Council of Faiths are at an embryonic stage and the Preston Faith Forum is currently considering organising women-only events. The women’s initiative of Huddersfield Interfaith Council, which was set up in 2006, organised a ‘one-off’ event in March 2006 and is hoping to organise two women-only events annually.

“It is an important part of the work of the Scottish Inter Faith Council to ensure that women from diverse faith communities are involved in inter faith dialogue and also to assist them (when appropriate) to have their voice heard in the civic processes of Scotland. Our women’s inter faith initiative has the aim of bringing women from the diverse faith traditions of Scotland together to build friendships and to explore how they can work together for a more just and inclusive Scotland. Currently we hold an annual inter faith seminar for women and we have also hosted inter faith coffee mornings for women during Inter Faith Week (Scotland).” **Women’s initiative, Scottish Inter Faith Council**

“The idea to hold events for women originally came from a successful Saturday morning over coffee and cakes with a small group of Christian Science and Muslim women, and also from a very relaxed and informative inter faith session during the Women and the Divine conference at Liverpool University last year, in 2005. After the success of these two gatherings, we decided to hold at least one meeting for women of faith this year as part of the inter faith work of the Merseyside Council of Faiths. The newly appointed Development Officer for the Council will be helping to organise this as part of his duties, along with women on the Council.” **Women’s initiative, Merseyside Council of Faiths**

### **3.6.3 Type C: Women’s inter faith initiatives that are a part of a larger single faith organisation or initiative**

These are initiatives that have been set up with a particular link to one faith community even though they have multi faith involvement.

Women’s inter faith initiatives that are part of one of the larger world faiths with communities in the UK include:

- Ecumenical and Interfaith Standing Committee, National Board of Catholic Women (NBCW)
- Faith Awareness, Inter Faith Programme of Christians Aware
- Interfaith Women’s Group and Turning Point, Touchstone Centre, Bradford
- Inter Faith Women’s Group, Churches Acting Together in Arthur’s Hill, Newcastle upon Tyne
- Sikh Nari Manch UK
- Women’s Dialogue Group, Interfaith Liaison Team, Diocese of Chichester
- Women in Faith course, Islamic Foundation, Markfield, Leicestershire
- Women’s Interfaith Dialogue Group, Churches’ Commission for Inter-Faith Relations (CCIFR)
- Women’s Interfaith Media Awareness Project, National Board of Catholic Women (NBCW)

There are also women's inter faith initiatives that are a part of newer religious movements such as the Brahma Kumaris' World Spiritual University UK and Bridge of Peace, a project of the Women's Federation for World Peace (founded by Dr Hak Ja Han Moon and her husband, the Rev Sun Myung Moon of the Unification Church).

Two examples of initiatives that are a part of a larger single faith organisation include the following:

"The women's initiative began to formally take shape during 2006. Following a couple of years of local informal visits to Jewish and Muslim women's groups, the intended work of the Interfaith Liaison Team is to propose a local women's dialogue involving an initial social gathering of Jewish, Christian and Muslim women. It is hoped this could lead to further dialogue and exchange, as well as an annual social gathering. Among the international initiatives of the team, in conjunction with colleagues from elsewhere, is a proposed e-mail exchange of women involved in inter faith dialogue. This would provide a forum in which to discuss some of the ethical and cultural difficulties they face. Another proposed international initiative, currently at a very early stage, is a theological exchange between Christian women in Britain and a Muslim women's seminary in Qum, Iran."

**Women's initiative, Interfaith Liaison Team, Diocese of Chichester**

"Our initiative was set up in 2005. The aims are to:

- a. Develop an accessible web-based, interfaith focal point for media literacy which will facilitate initiatives and disseminate media literacy resources and expertise.
- b. Increase knowledge and awareness among women of faith about the role and impact of the media in their own lives and their families, giving them the confidence to work together and express their views on media issues.
- c. Facilitate coordinated collaboration between women in faith communities by inviting groups and individuals to become Project Partners for action on media issues.

At grass roots level, the project will provide an opportunity for women of different faiths to come together to develop the impact of their media awareness and confidence at a local and national level." **Women's Interfaith Media Awareness Project, National Board of Catholic Women**

### **3.6.4 Type D: Women's inter faith initiatives that are a part of a secular organisation**

The following women's initiatives fall into this third category:

- Inter faith volunteering project, Asian Women's Advisory Service (AWAS)
- Women's initiative, Hyndburn Women's Forum

As their names suggest, they are both women's organisations dealing with either general women's issues (the Asian Women's Advisory Service) or community and faith-based issues (Hyndburn Women's Forum).

"We offer a drop-in centre for Asian women offering advice and support. We do casework in homelessness, housing, welfare rights and immigration and also have a counselling service, offer training and advocacy support, free legal advice sessions, and home and hospital visits for those who are elderly, disabled, unwell or frail. Our new initiative, which is a one year inter faith volunteering project, aims to train volunteers, all women, between the ages of 16 and 25 from the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities to work in the Hackney area. They will raise awareness of these faiths to enable better relations and strengthen links between these faith groups." **Inter faith volunteering project, Asian Women's Advisory Service (AWAS)**

### **3.6.5 Type E: Women's initiatives that are not specifically inter faith in their aims**

- Community Gardening, Centre for Bangladeshi Community Studies, Birmingham
- Ghar-se-Ghar, Luton
- Pathway Project, Staffordshire
- Tinsley Green Community Café, Tinsley Parents and Children's Consortium, Tinsley

The above women's initiatives have not been set up with specific inter faith aims in mind. However, they have developed a strong inter faith dimension, bringing together women from different backgrounds.

a. "We came together originally to provide a wide range of activities aimed at encouraging deprived BME communities in the West Midlands to raise their educational achievements, to develop their learning and skills, to raise their economic well being and build up social cohesion among faith communities. Our activities include advice and guidance surgery for benefits and better job prospects; education and employment training; after school activities for children and youth; sports development opportunities; social gatherings; celebration of religious and cultural festivals; workshops on major health, environmental, religious and cultural issues; research; publications; networking and many more. One of our most successful recent activities for women only has been the Community Gardening project in a derelict site in Yardley Green allotment in Birmingham, which has involved women and children from different faith groups. The project began in 2003, where women worked in the allotment from May to October each year. However, since this year, the initiative has been open to men as well. The project has succeeded in attracting women from Hindu, Muslim and Sikh backgrounds." **Community Gardening Project, Centre for Bangladeshi Community Studies**

b. “We are a co-operative partnership between women of different faiths and our aim is to support women by focusing on health issues. The initiative was set up in 1994, but we have been recognised as a co-op since May 2005. We conduct exercise classes and have talks and discussions on a number of health related topics. Two of our most successful projects for women of different faiths and ethnic backgrounds have been the open day on maternity issues held in September 2004 and the walk-in health centres for women set up in 2006. The partnership working with health professionals has been very successful.” **Ghar-se-Ghar (Home-to-Home)**

c. “We are a women’s domestic violence service whose ethos is Christian, but we work with women and children of any faith who have been abused in the home. We were established in 1991 to support women and children who have suffered abuse in the home, through a range of services including a 24 hour helpline, refuge accommodation, children’s services, counselling, floating support and so on. Although we are a local organisation, we take on women from anywhere in the UK and our service users can be of any faith.” **Pathway Project, Staffordshire**

d. “The Tinsley Parents and Children’s Consortium (TPCC) was established in 1999 to address the problem of the lack of childcare facilities in the area and to support women. We now run a 60 place childcare facility and work in conjunction with SureStart. The Tinsley Green Community Café was set up in June 2006 to revive local training and employment opportunities, to promote healthy eating and to provide a meeting place for the community. It is run by fourteen volunteers who are all women, but the café itself is open to both men and women. Currently, Christian, Hindu and Muslim women are involved in the project.” **Tinsley Green Community Café, TPCC**

### **3.6.6 Type F: Inter faith initiatives for girls and young women within secondary and higher education**

This project has not surveyed schools and universities around the UK but two interesting projects which were reported on by respondents highlight the significance of work in these contexts: MoJoW (a Jewish-Muslim women’s dialogue group at Cambridge University) and the Interfaith Society at the North London Collegiate School, a girls’ school.

“Our aim is to bring religiously-orientated Muslim and Jewish women together to meet and discuss important religious issues in a safe and controlled environment. Our primary activity is our dialogue session where a theme is chosen, and one Muslim and one Jewish woman will prepare a short presentation on this given theme. The discussion is then opened up to the group, who usually chat for hours! The women find much in common with each other and sometimes go out for coffee afterwards.” **MoJoW**

“We were set up in 2006 to promote understanding and communication between students of different faiths. So far, we have had talks about faith for students in the sixth form and held inter faith meetings for girls between 12 and 16.” **Interfaith Society, North London Collegiate School**

### 3.6.7 Other

The following four groups could not be placed in the above categories because their work is not specifically linked to women even though their activities are well represented by women:

- Dumfries and Galloway Inter Faith Group
- *Building Bridges of Understanding* project, Living History (North East) Limited
- Sacred Space, Birmingham
- The Salvation Army, Hayes, Middlesex

However, some very interesting activities are organised by these groups, some examples of which have been provided below:

a. **Dumfries and Galloway Inter Faith Group** – The group was established in 1998 and involves women of the following faiths: Baha’i, Christian and Quaker. They organise discussion groups, devotional meetings and visits to places of worship.

b. *Building Bridges of Understanding* project, Living History (North East) Limited – The organisation was established in 1995. Building Bridges of Understanding is relatively new and is an intergenerational inter faith project. As an oral history centre they are using oral history as a vehicle to bring together various generations/faiths/women/other to experience recording and documenting what others see as their faith and its impact on their lives. They involve women of Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh faiths.

c. **Sacred Space, Birmingham** – This group was established in 2002. They describe themselves as ‘a café society’ and organise social occasions in restaurants, cafés as well as community venues where people of different faiths can enjoy a meal, listen to a speaker, ask questions and make friends involving Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews and Sikhs.



d. **The Salvation Army, Hayes, Middlesex** – The community centre was set up in June 2004 and is open to all faiths and cultures. They host a 3 day a week Age Concern project which targets BME elders. As a result, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Christians and members of other faiths use the premises at least 3 days of the week. The youth club also has a multi faith membership and the Parent and Toddler groups also represent many faiths. Most of the people joining the centre’s activities from other faiths are women.

### 3.7 Conclusion

A significant part of this chapter has been devoted to describing the types of initiatives that have responded to the survey request in order to open a window to the rich variety of women’s initiatives that are developing throughout the UK. By focusing on particular initiatives, the activities of these initiatives have also been sometimes highlighted. A more detailed account of events and activities organised by *all* questionnaire respondents will be the subject of chapter 5.

i The wording “No formal religion” was used in the survey response.

## Chapter 4: Aims and Ways of Working

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the aims of the different types of women's initiatives, their ways of working and their resources in terms of staffing, funding, venues and premises.

### 4.2 Aims of initiatives

In highlighting the work of some of the women's initiatives in the last chapter, some reference has already been made to the aims of certain initiatives and why they were established. Most of the initiatives have 'traditional' inter faith aims, but with a focus on women and with the aim of empowering women within a context of faith. Some examples are:

"To meet each other and develop friendships and understanding of each other and each other's faiths."

**Faith Awareness – inter faith programme of Christians Aware**

"To form friendships across faith frontiers."

**Leicester Christian-Muslim Women's Group**

"To share common concerns, to learn more about each other and about others' faiths and to promote better understanding."

**Women's initiative, Huddersfield Interfaith Council**

"To offer role models of women speaking and leading discussion in matters of faith."

**Women's initiative, Interfaith Milton Keynes**

"To increase confidence among women of faith."

**Women's initiative, Interfaith Milton Keynes**

"To be a friendship and discussion group for women of different faiths."

**St Alban's Interfaith Women's Group**

"To break down barriers, overcome fear and prejudice, get to know one another and build trust and lasting friendships."

**Women's Peace Meeting, Birmingham**

More overtly social and political aims are apparent with 4 inter faith organisations that responded to the survey. They are the Thames Gateway Women's Multifaith Forum; the women's initiative of Scottish Inter Faith Council; the Merseyside Council of Faiths; and the Women's Interfaith Media Awareness Project at the National Board of Catholic Women.

“We aim to be an active channel of communication between local community groups, developers and partner organisations through publicity, events and reports.” **Thames Gateway Women’s Multifaith Forum**

“Our women’s inter faith initiative has the aim of bringing women from the diverse faith traditions of Scotland together to build friendships and to explore how they can work together for a more just and inclusive Scotland.” **Scottish Inter Faith Council**

“The aim of the Council is to encourage mutual friendship and education, to help build good community relations, and to relate with statutory bodies as a means of consultation with faith communities.” **Merseyside Council of Faiths**

“The project will provide an opportunity for women of different faiths to come together to develop the impact of their media awareness and confidence at a local and national level.” **Women’s Interfaith Media Awareness Project**

A few other initiatives with very specific, mainly social, aims are the Pathway Project; Ghar-se-Ghar; the *Women in Faith* course run by the Islamic Foundation; the inter faith volunteering project run by the Asian Women’s Advisory Service (AWAS); and the Tinsley Green Community Café. These are all projects designed to meet certain objectives, within a given period of time.

#### **4.3 Ways of working, staffing, communicating and funding of initiatives**

In the questionnaire returns, half of the respondents described their initiatives as informal in structure and over half of the initiatives had no paid staff. 31% per cent of initiatives had no funding at all, other than members’ donations. The exceptions were generally those initiatives that are projects within larger organisations, which have sufficient funds to hire staff and pay for venues.

##### **4.3.1 Management structures**

A half of all responding initiatives described themselves as ‘formally structured’ with a committee and officers, while the other half of initiatives were informal in structure. However, even within the informally structured initiatives, often there are women who are more active than other members, particularly in organising various projects and ensuring that the initiative moves forward.

### 4.3.2 Staffing

**Table 4: Number of organisations run by volunteers only, part time staff, full time staff**

Type of staff	Number of organisations
Volunteers only	27
Part time paid staff	11
Full time paid staff	10

27 (64%) initiatives had no paid staff at all. They operated on the hard work and commitment of the members/volunteers. 15 organisations had paid staff, who worked *either* full time or part time. 4 organisations had at least one full time *and* one part time member of staff.

### 4.3.3 Venues and premises

The questionnaire asked respondents where their initiative(s) usually take place. 10 of the responding initiatives had highlighted 'In one of our own homes', 12 had highlighted 'At faith community venues' and 23 had mentioned 'Other' venues. In a majority of cases the venue depended on the type of activity taking place. So, for example, informal discussion groups would often take place in a member's home, while a fundraising dinner would be hosted at a community centre or a church hall. Venues that fell into the category of 'other' included school and university premises, community meeting rooms/centres, organisations' own premises, and town halls.

### 4.3.4 Ways of communicating

The survey included one question on whether responding initiatives had a website or newsletter. Only 10 respondents mentioned having a website and 8 produced a newsletter. However, of the 10 organisations that had websites, only 3 highlighted their women's initiatives. These were: the Pathway Project; Sikh Nari Manch UK; and the Women's Interfaith Network. The most commonly cited reason for not creating and maintaining a website was the difficulty in finding the expertise and funding. This has prevented many women's initiatives from making known their important work to a wider audience.

### 4.3.5 Funding

Of the 42 initiatives involved in the survey, 14 had no funding other than members' own donations, while 30 initiatives mentioned some level of funding from a variety of different sources. Sources cited include: the Faith Communities' Capacity Building Fund (FCCBF); unspecified Home Office support; Mother's Union; Churches' Regional Commission – Leeds; Methodist Women's Network; Methodist Church; Community Chest – Voluntary Action, Leicester; Regional Council; Awards for All; Big Lottery; Single Regeneration Budget (SRB); Roger Hooker Trust and other charitable trusts; sponsorship funding; Neighbourhood Renewal Funding; Borough Council Funding; and Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC). MoJoW, the higher education example mentioned earlier, received some funding from Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge.

In most cases, funding received was for small sums of money and described as ‘minimal’ by respondents but some emphasised the very large amount of work that could be done with relatively small grants.

“Our current funding of £2,600 comes from the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund; this venture could not have taken place without it. A relatively small amount of money can have such a big impact.” **Organiser, women and religion lecture and discussion series, Interfaith Milton Keynes**

#### **4.4 Partnership working**

Over half of the respondents (59%) mentioned working in partnership with a variety of groups and organisations in conducting inter faith activity. Although survey responses to the question on partnership work were brief and not much information is available on the level and nature of partnership work, some examples of good practice include:

- The Ecumenical and Interfaith Committee of the National Board of Catholic Women (NBCW) undertaking partnership work with Women of Faith Coalition, Women’s Interfaith Network and the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women.
- Ghar-se-Ghar working in partnership with health professionals, Safer Luton Partnership, the public services and Chiltern Societies to provide a better health service to the women of diverse faiths who are involved in the project.
- The inter faith volunteering project of the Asian Women’s Advisory Service (AWAS) working in conjunction with faith, educational and local community groups for the success of the project.
- One Voice (Keighley Women and Girls’ Interfaith Group) working together with the local inter faith forum and the Powerful Whispers Women’s Group (multi cultural community group).
- The women’s initiative of the Scottish Inter Faith Council involving local inter faith groups and women’s committees from within faith communities in their activities.
- Sikh Nari Manch UK undertaking projects with the Black Women’s Network, Hindu Women’s Group, Women Acting in Today’s Society (WAITS) and the Birmingham Community Empowerment Network.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

It is indeed remarkable how much the initiatives participating in this research have achieved and continue to achieve with very few material resources. This fact is emphasised even more when one looks at the exciting and diverse the range of activities that have been organised by these initiatives mainly with the gift of time and dedication of volunteers who run the groups.

## Chapter 5: Activities and successful events

### 5.1 Introduction

Two of the questions in the survey concentrated on the activities organised by respondents. The first question was a general one requesting information on the kind of activity or work that was taking place within the initiative and the second was a more specific one asking respondents to describe two of their most successful recent events or activities. Since the responses to these two questions often overlap, this chapter of the survey will combine the feedback and discuss the responses to these two questions together. Some of the activities of initiatives have already been highlighted in the previous chapter in the process of describing the work of various organisations. In such cases, to avoid repetition, the initiatives will be referred to where necessary, but not discussed in detail.

### 5.2 The variety in the kinds of work carried out by responding initiatives/organisations

The table below lists the activities that were most frequently mentioned in the questionnaire returns. Other activities not covered in the table below will be looked at individually in the next section of the chapter.

**Table 5: Types of activities organised by women's initiatives**

Activity	No. of women's initiatives organising these activities
Shared meals	12
Dialogue/discussions/meetings	10
Celebration of events such as religious festivals, inter faith weeks and Women's Day	7
Fundraising events and social gatherings	5
Visits to places of interest	6
Workshops, seminars, conferences	6
Visits to places of worship	4
Courses	2
Other	13

#### 5.2.1 Shared meals

'Shared meals' was the most popular activity organised by some of the initiatives. Depending on the faiths involved, the meals were generally described as vegetarian, especially if the events took place in the home of a participant. Shared meals were often preceded or followed by informal discussions on a faith or social issue.

“We organise meals and speakers at a variety of restaurants and community and faith venues. One of our most successful initiatives was a meal at the *Warehouse Café* in Birmingham, where we had a speaker talking to us about ‘What happens to Asylum Seekers Refused Entry’.” **Sacred Space, Birmingham**

“Our meetings take place once in 2 to 3 months in one of our homes. A vegetarian meal is organised for the evening and we usually have a discussion on current issues as well as plan our current and future projects.” **Faith Awareness – inter faith Programme of Christians Aware**

### 5.2.2 Dialogue/discussions/meetings

The Leicester Christian-Muslim Women’s Group was set up in 2002 for women of Christian and Muslim faith backgrounds to explore aspects of each other’s beliefs and practices. It is essentially a dialogue group that meets approximately once in 6 weeks and has covered topics such as traditions in Islam, denominations in Christianity, marriage customs and the scriptures.

Similarly, St Alban’s Interfaith Women’s Group was founded in 2003 to be a friendship and discussion group for women of different faiths. The group meets every 6-8 weeks and a discussion topic or theme is agreed upon before the meeting. Topics covered include: giving to charity, forgiveness, women in religion, images of God, and ways in which festivals are celebrated. Topics to be discussed in future meetings include concepts of heaven and hell and the depiction of prophets in the scriptures.

The inter faith initiative in Dorking (discussed in more detail in chapter 3) came out of an ecumenical discussion group that meets monthly to share responses to a variety of books of a spiritual nature. Since the inter faith initiative was set up in 2005, involving Christian and Muslim women, two discussions have taken place on the topics of festivals in Islam and the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine/Israel.

The Edinburgh Women’s Inter Faith Group (mentioned in chapter 3) meet each month to discuss an issue that members find relevant. Topics that have been discussed recently include sacred texts of faiths and the attitude to women in different faiths. Topics planned for the future include festivals and prominent people in the faiths represented in the women’s group.

The Women’s Peace Meeting has developed its own identity in the Birmingham area, with a core group of women meeting on a regular basis. The initiative began at the height of the war in Bosnia in 1993, when a few, mainly Christian, women met to pray for peace. When the war ended, some of the women felt they should continue to meet and, gradually, the meetings have become inter faith. At the meetings, women share their thoughts on their faith, life experiences, countries of origin and culture, social issues and concerns, countries where there is war, conflict resolution and particular initiatives for peace and so on. Practical outcomes and activities of the meetings have included help for refugees, fundraising, an inter faith Tapestry for Peace and travelling on pilgrimage together.

Initiatives that have described dialogues/discussions/meetings as one their most successful events include the following:

- The Oldham Women's Inter Faith Network's bi-monthly monthly discussion groups, which commenced in September 2005, have covered subjects on justice, charity, the Haj pilgrimage as well as creating a time to share and recommend books of interest. These were pre-dated by invitations to each other's faiths activities and spiritual explorations.
- With funding from 'Linking Communities' (Bradford Community Cohesion), One Voice (Keighley Women and Girls' Interfaith Group) organised a meal for 35-40 women at a community venue, which was followed by discussions led by a Muslim, Christian, Buddhist and Hindu speaker respectively on various topics ranging from arranged marriages to the discovery of peace.
- The Women's Interfaith Dialogue Group of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland's Commission for Inter Faith Relations (CCIFR) meets biannually to discuss news, inter faith initiatives, and listen to speakers on local and national inter faith issues. Their most recent discussion group took place in February 2006 where the following questions were discussed in light of the events of 7 July 2005: Do we need to review the nature and aims of being multicultural? Have events surrounding 7 July affected life in Britain? How can faiths help one another?

Other groups that organise dialogue/discussion groups include: Alif-Aleph UK; Dumfries and Galloway Inter Faith Group; the Ecumenical and Interfaith Standing Committee of the National Board of Catholic Women (NBCW); and Faith Awareness – the inter faith programme of Christians Aware. The two examples of inter faith initiatives for girls and young women highlighted in chapter 3, which are MojoW and the Interfaith Society, also cite discussions and meetings as their popular activities.

### **5.2.3 Celebration of events such as religious festivals, inter faith weeks and Women's Day**

The Hyndburn Women's Forum originally came together in 1997 to celebrate International Women's Day, which falls on 8th March every year. They have described an International Women's Week event, which comprised nine events in seven days, as one of their most successful events. Two other groups that have described celebration of special events as one of their most successful activities include:

- Dumfries and Galloway Inter Faith Group's inter faith service to commemorate the UN Day of Peace.
- Bridge of Peace (Women's Federation for World Peace) working together with the Watford Town Centre chaplain and Watford Interfaith Association to organise a festival of Cultures and Faiths in 2005, which brought together more than 21 cultural and faith organisations from around Watford.

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, UK, also hold an event annually to celebrate UN International Women's Day.

Other groups such as the Thames Gateway Women's Multifaith Forum, Oldham Women's Inter Faith Network and the Touchstone Centre all organise activities to celebrate religious festivals.



### 5.2.4 Fundraising events and social gatherings

Activities that fall into this category are usually for both men and women as the aim is generally to raise money for certain charitable causes and/or to increase the profile of the organisation or initiative. Four initiatives that were described in the questionnaire responses are reproduced below:

“We organise a Muslim-Christian fundraising dinner every year. It is a mixed event and the funds raised are split into three to support one Muslim project, one Christian project and one Leicester city project.”  
**Leicester Christian-Muslim Women’s Group**

“The topic of ‘Giving’ came up at one of the discussions and this was during the time the earthquake in Pakistan took place in 2005. Funds were raised by individuals and the Interfaith Forum. We are exploring ways to link with women in the affected areas, for an exchange of information and experiences.” **Oldham Women’s Inter Faith Network**

“Our first annual Inter Faith Sponsored Walk was organised in 1999. It started with about 20 Sikh women and today is open to families of all faiths. We have raised funds for various charities locally, nationally and internationally. Each year we raise between £1000 and £3000.”  
**Sikh Nari Manch UK**

“On 10 November 2005 we held a Sharing evening event at Miskin Hall in Gravesend. Ninety members from different faiths, organisations and inter faith initiatives participated and it was a great success.” **Thames Gateway Women’s Multifaith Forum**

“Women from all faiths raised money in 1998 in their temples, mosques, churches, gurdwaras and so on to build an inter faith children’s home in India.” **Women’s Peace Meeting, Birmingham**

### 5.2.5 Visits to other places and events of interest and ‘inter faith walks’

Trips to other locations and events are also an important part of the lives of many women’s initiatives. For example, the Interfaith Women’s Group (Touchstone Centre) arranged a visit to Malham Dales in 2006. Alif-Aleph commented on visits to sites and cultural events of joint interest and exhibitions, plays and films.

In the case of Oldham Women’s Inter Faith Network, one of their most successful initiatives has been walks in parts of Oldham that are predominantly ‘white’ areas, where there is relatively little religious diversity.

### 5.2.6 Workshops, seminars and conferences

Six organisations mentioned their workshops, seminars or conferences as a significant aspect of their work.

- The women's initiative of Interfaith Milton Keynes ran a successful series of 5 lectures/seminars on the subject of women and faith under the title: '*Different Paths: Women's Journeys of Faith*' from June to July 2006. A majority of participants were women and the seminars enabled Interfaith Milton Keynes to reach at least 100 women. This is the first project of its kind to be organised by the group. Although not many men attended the seminars, a representative of the group cites the following reason for keeping the seminars open to members of both sexes:

“We debated whether to make the lectures women-only, but decided that the opportunity to demonstrate women leading discussion was too important not to make this visible for men as well as women.”

- The women's initiative of the Scottish Inter Faith Council organised a recent inter faith event for women entitled *Women and War – How Can We Work together for Peace*. Although a difficult and controversial subject the feedback from the 50 women who participated indicated that they felt the meeting was uplifting, and gave them hope. The day also included a guided tour of Jenny Matthews photographic exhibition of 'women and war', workshops and lunch.
- Sikh Nari Manch UK conduct monthly workshops for women of all faiths on confidence building, domestic violence, anger management, substance abuse and safety at home. The aim of these workshops is to empower women of all ages and backgrounds.
- The Women of Faith Coalition held a seminar on *The Family* in the Jubilee Room at the Palace of Westminster. This topic was selected as the group believes that the family is the bedrock of society. As it was not possible to ask members of all religions to define their understanding of the word 'family' in one seminar, the group agreed to invite representatives of three religions in this country (Jewish, Muslim and Christian in order of presentation). The speakers were Baroness Neuberger, Baroness Uddin and Dr Carrie Pemberton respectively. There were several contributions from the floor from other religions.
- *The Power of One* seminar organised by the Women's Interfaith Network (WIN) in March 2006. The event was attended by about 150 women of different faiths and speakers included an Israeli Jew, a Palestinian Christian and a Palestinian Muslim and a member of the Metropolitan Police Service. An excerpt from 'A Message from the Co Founders' of WIN distributed at the seminar reads as follows:

‘The Power of One’ is part of our vision and hope. A hope that each one of us can build an understanding and compassionate society through our belief in the importance of pluralism and collaborative engagement.

- For many years, the World Spiritual University UK of the Brahma Kumaris have offered women-only workshops for women of all faiths on themes such as Self Esteem, The Four Faces of Woman, A Woman's Way (looking at how women use power and responsibility) A Conversation with Remarkable Women (for women leaders). Some of the aims of their workshops and training are to help women grow spiritually, develop leadership qualities and encourage the development of self-esteem.

### 5.2.7 Visits to places of worship

For some initiatives, visits to places of worship have been one of their most successful activities, for example: the St Alban's Interfaith Women's Group's visit to a Buddhist temple and monastery in 2005; the Women's Interfaith Dialogue Group's visit to the Buddhist Vihara in Chiswick in June 2005; and the Thames Gateway Women's Multifaith Forum's visit to the Hindu Temple in Neasden.

### 5.2.8 Courses

Two courses designed specially for women were mentioned in the questionnaire responses. One is being offered by the Islamic Foundation based in Leicestershire and the other, which has already taken place, was organised by the Society For Dialogue and Action, Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge.

- Funded by the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund and commencing in July 2006, The Islamic Foundation is running a course titled *Women in Faith* over six weekends throughout the year. It is for women over 18 years of age and will lead to the launch of a Muslim women's network for inter faith work. Participants will be awarded a certificate from The Islamic Foundation. At present, 45 women have been offered places on the course.
- The women's inter faith *Building Bridges* course of the Society for Dialogue and Action took place during May and June 2006. Supported by the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund and Cambridge City Council, the course aimed to provide a safe and comfortable environment for women to reach out to one another to promote dialogue and engage in positive (inter)action. The course comprised a combination of talks by members of the 'Abrahamic' faiths and visits to a synagogue, church and mosque.

### 5.2.9 Other activities

There were a number of activities for women mentioned in the questionnaires that do not fit easily into the categories above but reflect important aspects of women's work taking place in the country.

- a. The Ecumenical and Interfaith Standing Committee's publication of the pamphlet titled *Strangers or Friends? Women Speaking to Women of Other Faiths* in 2005. The aim of the pamphlet is to encourage women in parishes who wish to make contact with women of other faiths, and to provide a resource.
- b. Organisation of a study weekend for the Catholic Women's League on inter faith dialogue.  
Ecumenical and Interfaith Standing Committee, National Board of Catholic Women (NBCW)
- Publication, in 2005, of the book titled *Faith Offerings*, which 'represents the response of Leicester Women for Inter Faith Understanding to essential human experiences.' **Faith Awareness – inter faith programme of Christians Aware**

- Initiative involving organising a women's only swimming time at the municipal swimming pool in Cambridge which is attended weekly by Jewish and Muslim women. The swimming pool has now become an additional point of contact for the women. This has been written about in local newspapers as a breakthrough in inter faith relations. **MoJoW**
- Initiatives involving making banners. These were mentioned by the Oldham Women's Inter Faith Network and the women's initiatives of Huddersfield Interfaith Council and Scottish Inter Faith Council. According to the women's initiative of the Scottish Inter Faith Council, designing their banner was a hugely successful activity, involving over 100 women from diverse faith traditions who worked together with renowned artist Claire Hunter over the course of a year. The women's inter faith banner is now on display at St. Mungo's Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow.
- An inter faith women's event held at the Scottish Parliament. This entailed a trip to the Scottish Parliament, where the women enjoyed presentations from various Parliamentary Committees and MSPs. The women also made helpful suggestions on how to improve the Room for Contemplation in the Scottish Parliament. **The women's initiative, Scottish Inter Faith Council**
- a. Weekly yoga and meditation classes for women of all faiths.  
b. Annual residential spiritual retreat held in the first weekend in July. When this retreat first took place in 1999, it attracted 20 women. Today, it has an attendance of about 70 to 100 women. The Bournville Village Trust, local gurdwaras, business people and other individual donors sponsor the retreat and it takes place at the Bilberry Hill Residential Centre in the Licky Hills area of Birmingham. Apart from walks in the hills, meditation, yoga and aerobic exercises, there are also discussions, lectures and workshops on issues affecting women, as well as information and counselling sessions. The retreat is one of the most successful activities of the initiative. **Sikh Nari Manch UK**
- Plans to set up Women's Interfaith Network (WIN) groups in London boroughs. Currently, WIN is focusing on the boroughs of Lambeth and Tower Hamlets and working on increasing the women's network membership in these areas before moving on to set up more groups in other parts of London.  
**Women's Interfaith Network**

### 5.3 Conclusion

A number of factors have to be taken into account when setting up any initiative or organising any activity, such as what the aim/purpose of the activity is, who it is trying to reach, how it will be funded, where, when, how often and how it will be carried out, whether it is sustainable and so on.

A majority of the activities mentioned above have been organised by women working on a voluntary basis. The success of these events has been largely due to the dedication, commitment and hard work of members of the initiatives. Some of these activities have developed organically in that the women who have launched certain initiatives have identified, through the method of trial and error and experience, what works best for the communities they are trying to reach in the areas in which they are living and working. One reason why the activities that have been successful have been so is because representatives of the various initiatives have been open and sensitive to the needs of all the women they have involved in their work.

## **Chapter 6: Observations and reflections**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This research has surveyed existing patterns of local and national women's inter faith initiatives and identified the diverse range of activities that have been put in place by a wide variety of projects and organisations. More generally, it has flagged up examples of good practice, which may influence and inform current and future women's inter faith initiatives in the UK.

Further, the findings of the research point to a number of interesting observations that may be useful in enhancing and supporting inter faith work that is set up for women. These observations have been mentioned in the following section in the hope that they may help people who are involved in this line of activity.

### **6.2 Observations relating to practical issues**

This section has been divided into two to distinguish between observations that are related to practical issues, such as setting up and conducting women's inter faith work, and reflections that are associated with sociological/psychological issues such as women's roles and qualities.

#### **6.2.1 Common aims but diverse ways of working**

The principal theme that has run through this report is the diversity and vibrancy of the activities that are taking place for women in the field of inter faith work. Many of these initiatives are motivated by similar aims, such as to promote better understanding among faith communities; to form friendships; to offer women opportunities to learn more about each other's faiths; and to provide safe and comfortable venues for women to interact and voice their views. However, as chapter 3 shows, there are many paths that can be taken to achieve common goals. Some women's initiatives are independent groups and others are part of larger inter faith, faith or secular organisations, yet, they have all had success in achieving their aims. There is no one correct way of forming a successful group or initiative. This is encouraging as it gives individuals, small groups and organisations the flexibility to set up their own women's inter faith initiatives in ways best suited to their means and requirements.

#### **6.2.2 Women's inter faith activities as examples**

Chapter 4 brought to the fore different types of activities and events designed for women. It is hoped that existing groups and/or those being set up may find this information useful in providing models for their own work. Of course, as mentioned earlier in the report, activities cannot always be reproduced elsewhere successfully without appropriate adaptation. They must be tailored to the needs of the faith communities being represented as well as the circumstances, ethos and objectives of each individual initiative/group.

### **6.2.3 Funding Issues**

Many of the women's initiatives highlighted in the report operate on a very small budget or no budget at all and finding ways of funding activities and keeping the groups afloat can often be of significant concern. It is encouraging to note that some groups apply for and are successful in receiving grants for individual projects and such groups have commented on how far even a little financial support has taken them. Therefore, it may be worthwhile for organisers of initiatives to learn more about where different sources of funding exist and how these may be accessed, even though the process of securing funding can sometimes be time-consuming for groups operating with volunteers and few resources.

### **6.2.4 Partnership working**

Even though the report did not focus on partnership work in great depth, the responses of various initiatives indicate that they work in partnership, in some capacity, with a variety of organisations and individuals. Some of the most successful activities of women's initiatives highlighted have been those that have involved other groups and organisations. Partnership or collaborative work is an essential part of good practice as it enables everyone involved in a project to share their knowledge, expertise and, sometimes, resources to achieve better outcomes.

### **6.2.5 The usefulness of websites**

Very few women's initiatives referred to in the report mention that they have a website highlighting their work. Even some of the larger inter faith, faith or secular organisations cited in the report that have their own websites, do not mention their women's work on the websites. Setting up and maintaining a simple website could contribute greatly to make the work of women's initiatives and groups better known as well as help initiatives to network in a more effective way.

## **6.3 Observations related to sociological/psychological themes**

One of the preliminary questions that prompted this research was why women have felt the need to set up their own inter faith initiatives. Although the questionnaire did not address this theme in great depth, 71% of respondents offered some comment on the 'roles' and 'qualities' of women that helped them make positive contributions to inter faith work (discussed in chapter 2). However, as mentioned in chapter 2, accepting that men and women have certain innate qualities that make them more suited to certain activities and tasks is a much disputed area of discussion and should be approached tentatively.

Some respondents mentioned that women's 'roles' as mothers can make them better negotiators and sensitive to the needs of others, which they perceived as important skills in conducting inter faith activity. While this may be the case, it can, again, raise questions of gender stereotyping and prevent men and women from undertaking work and activities that have been traditionally assigned to the two sexes.

Respondents' views on and experiences of barriers and challenges faced by women in fully participating in inter faith activity provide an important insight into why women have felt the need to create their own spaces to explore ways to promote inter faith activity, with minimal involvement from men. Inter faith

initiatives specifically for women may be the best way to engage more women in dialogue who may otherwise be difficult to access or approach. At the same time, involving more women in general inter faith organisations is very important.

#### **6.4 Future of women's inter faith initiatives in the UK**

The rise in women's inter faith initiatives in the past few years has been an encouraging sign that people are keen to engage in inter faith activity, especially during a time when the political and religious climate, nationally and internationally, has often been tense and unsettled. In such an environment, it is heartening that more women are coming forward with ways to build good inter faith relations. Their commitment and efforts will, undoubtedly, make a vital and powerful contribution towards developing mutual respect and understanding between faith communities.

# Appendix 1 – Project Questionnaire

## Women's Inter Faith Initiatives – A Survey

Thank you for taking the time to answer the questions in this short survey and to respond by Tuesday 20 June 2006. Your contribution is very much appreciated.

If you require more space for your responses, please feel free to write or type in further comments on a separate page and attach it to the questionnaire. Please remember to include the number of the question next to your response.

If you have any queries, please telephone Fatheena Mubarak on [x] or email [x]

Your name:

---

Name of your organisation or initiative:

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Address:

---

---

Postcode:

---

Phone number:

---

Email address:

---

Date:

---

I am sending back a completed return and would like to be sent a complimentary copy of the report when the survey is completed:

☐ Yes

☐ No



## **About our women's inter faith initiative**

### **1) We are (tick/underline one or more as appropriate):**

- a) An inter faith group or multi faith forum
- b) A 'project' within another organisation
- c) A small dialogue group
- d) A committee or section of another organisation (such as a faith community body)
- e) Other – please describe:

If you are part of another organisation, please explain briefly what this is and how your group or project fits within its work – for example as a special 'one off' project of a youth organisation or a committee on women's issues of a national faith community body.

### **2) As a women's inter faith initiative, our aims are (please describe briefly) :**

### **3) Our initiative was set up in (year):**

### **4) We were set up or came together originally because (please describe briefly):**

**5) We are (please tick/underline as appropriate):**

- a) Local
- b) Regional
- c) National
- d) UK wide

**6) We usually meet (please tick/underline as appropriate):**

- a) In one of our own homes
- b) At faith community venues
- c) Other (please specify)

**7) We hold the following sorts of activities or carry out the following kinds of work (please describe briefly):**

**8) Two of our most successful recent activities or projects have been:**

Initiative 1:

Initiative 2:

**9) Our activities are (please tick or underline as appropriate):**

- a) For women only
- b) For women and men
- c) Some for women and some for women and men

Please use this space if you would like to offer any comment about the choice whether to have some or all events just for women.

**10) The women involved in our project(s) are (please tick/underline relevant age range(s)):**

- |             |          |
|-------------|----------|
| a) All ages | d) 25-40 |
| b) 14-18    | e) 41-59 |
| c) 19-24    | f) 60 +  |

**11) We involve women of the following faiths (please tick/underline as appropriate):**

- |           |                   |
|-----------|-------------------|
| Baha'i    | Jewish            |
| Buddhist  | Muslim            |
| Christian | Sikh              |
| Hindu     | Zoroastrian       |
| Jain      | Other: please add |

**12) Our initiative undertakes partnership working or projects with (please tick/underline as appropriate):**

- a) The local inter faith forum
- b) Other (please describe)

**13) Our work (please tick/underline as appropriate):**

- a) has no funding other than members' donations
- b) has some funding

If you have ticked (b), it would be helpful if you could describe briefly the type(s) of funding you are currently receiving and the kind of project or core work it is helping enable.

**14) We have (please tick/underline as appropriate):**

- a) no paid staff – we are all volunteers
- b) part time paid staff (please indicate how many)
- c) full time paid staff (please indicate how many)

**15) We are (please tick or underline as appropriate):**

- a) formally structured, with a committee and officers (such as chair, secretary, treasurer)
- b) informal in structure

Please use to the space below to add any comments you would like to offer about how you work:

**16) We have:**

- a) a website (please give details)
- b) a regular newsletter (please give details)

**17) If you have time and would like to offer comment, it would be interesting to have your responses to the following questions:**

a) Have you any comments or suggestions on how women can play a role in fostering positive inter faith relations? Do you think that women have something quite specific/special to contribute to building good inter faith relations?

b) Do you have any observations you would like to share on the pattern and level of involvement of women of different faiths in general (not women's) inter faith initiatives at national, regional and local level?

c) What challenges, if any, do women face in playing a full role in inter faith activity?

d) Are there any resources (such as organisations, websites, publications) or speakers you have found particularly helpful in your work and that you would like to recommend to others?

Please return the questionnaire by **Tuesday 20 June 2006** by email to [x] or by post to:

Dr Fatheena Mubarak, c/o Inter Faith Network for the UK, 8A Lower Grosvenor, Place, London SW1W 0EN  
or by fax to the Network Office: 020 7931 7722. **Thank you.**

Information which you have kindly provided for this project will be used for the purposes of the project as outlined in the letter accompanying this form and for the Inter Faith Network's work of promoting good inter faith relations. Personal contact details will not be shared with any third party without your permission.

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## Appendix 2 – Responding initiatives: information and contacts

42 organisations responded to the survey questionnaire. Their responses have been drawn on in the main report which considers their work thematically and highlights particular issues which may be of interest to those developing work in this field. This annex provides a short description of the work of each of the bodies in directory style, in alphabetical order of initiative. In each case, a contact email address is given with the permission of the body listed so that the reader can obtain further information.

**Alif-Aleph women's initiative.** The women's initiative is part of a national inter faith body, Alif Aleph, which was founded in 2003 ([www.aauk.org](http://www.aauk.org)). Its discussion groups, shared meals, visits to sites and cultural events of joint interest enable Muslim and Jewish women, who may feel marginalised or uncomfortable in a mixed surrounding, to meet and share experiences, build trust and friendships. The programme started in 2006. For further information contact Daniella Shaw at: [info@aauk.org](mailto:info@aauk.org)

**Asian Women's Advisory Service, Inter Faith Volunteering Project.** AWAS is a drop-in advice and support centre for Asian women ([www.awas.org.uk](http://www.awas.org.uk)). In 2006 it began a project to recruit and train women volunteers between 16-25 years of age from the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh traditions in the Hackney area. This will raise awareness of these faiths to enable better inter faith relations. Through engagement and dialogue between the volunteers, links will be strengthened between the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh faith groups. Further information from Dr Nazima Osman at: [ifawas@hotmail.com](mailto:ifawas@hotmail.com)

**Bradford Trident – Trident Area Faith Forum women's initiative.** Bradford Trident is a community led company working to transform the Park Lane, Marshfields and West Bowling areas of Bradford ([www.bradfordtrident.co.uk](http://www.bradfordtrident.co.uk)). It was formed in 2000 to deliver the Government's New Deal for Communities programme. Among its initiatives are a Women's Forum and a Faith Forum. The Faith Forum is currently developing its work to involve more women of minority faiths in the Faith Forum and enable them to contribute effectively to the regeneration of the area. Further information from Aurangzeb Khan at: [Aurangzeb.khan@bradford.gov.uk](mailto:Aurangzeb.khan@bradford.gov.uk)

**Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University UK.** A religious movement which came into being in India in 1936 and in which women play a leading role ([www.bkwsu.org](http://www.bkwsu.org)). Work particularly relevant to women's issues includes holding courses, workshops, training, seminars and conferences on women's issues and annual events in celebration of UN International Women's Day. A number of these activities involve women of different faiths. BKWSU – UK describe their work as bringing women together for spiritual support, helping them grow spiritually and apply spiritual skills in their everyday life, instilling leadership qualities in women and helping women understand how they can contribute to the world. Further information from Sister Maureen at: [maureen.goodman@uk.bkwsu.org](mailto:maureen.goodman@uk.bkwsu.org)

**Bridge of Peace, WFP Watford.** The project began in March 2003 at the outbreak of military action in Iraq. It brought women from the Christian and Muslim faiths together in a sisterhood ceremony to work as 'peace sisters' to overcome prejudices and suspicions and learn about each other's faiths and cultures. The 'Bridge of Peace' runs projects together to promote peace, understanding and harmonious relationships between the two communities. It has also organised visits to places of worship, helped in fundraising events, shared meals and picnics, helped organize a festival to celebrate the various cultures and faiths that constitute the Watford community and participated in peace rallies. Some of the activities are also for men.

The 'Bridge of Peace' project is an initiative of the Women's Federation for World Peace founded by Dr Hak Ja Han Moon. <http://www.wfwp.org/bridge/Bridge.htm> For further information contact Françoise Murphy at: [pfgodart@aol.com](mailto:pfgodart@aol.com)

**Centre for Bangladeshi Community Studies' initiatives for women.** The Centre, founded in 2003, runs a range of activities, a number of which have as a key aim bringing together women from Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh backgrounds to learn more about each others' faiths. These include inter faith discussions and workshops, community trips, and the recently established Interfaith Families Development Project to develop derelict allotment land at Yardley Green. Further information from Dr M Millat-e-Mustafa at: [cbs@btinternet.com](mailto:cbs@btinternet.com)

**Churches Acting Together in Arthur's Hill 'Chat Shop' Inter Faith Women's Group.** The 'Chat Shop' is a drop in centre managed by Churches Acting Together in Arthur's Hill, Newcastle upon Tyne (4 local Christian churches). It provides people with a place to meet and chat, has a café and a toy library and is a base for various advice services. The Inter Faith Women's Group is a new Chat Shop project which it is intended will bring together Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh women within a culturally non-confrontational environment where they can meet as equals to make friends across cultural and faith divides, gain a greater understanding of the different faith communities and discover shared values, interests and concerns that will promote social cohesion in Arthur's Hill. Further information from Carol Harle: [thechatshop250@btconnect.com](mailto:thechatshop250@btconnect.com)

**Dumfries and Galloway Inter Faith Group.** A general inter faith group, running since 1998 and working to raise awareness of the faith communities in the region and foster greater understanding and harmony among these by encouraging inter faith dialogue and joint activities and emphasising the common denominators underlying all religions. Although not a women's group, the majority of members are women. Further information from Venus Carew at: [venuscarew@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:venuscarew@yahoo.co.uk)

**Ecumenical and Interfaith Standing Committee of the National Board of Catholic Women.** The NBCW is a consultative body to the Catholic Bishop's Conference of England and Wales consisting of representatives from 32 major organizations and 22 Dioceses. It serves as a forum in which Catholic Women are enabled to exchange experiences, express their hopes and concerns and make recommendations. The Standing Committee began its work in 2001. Its purpose is to encourage women of Catholic faith to be aware of common needs of women of other faith communities and to be creative, sensitive, and courageous in their interaction and dialogue with them, with the aim of promoting respect, peace, and harmony between women who have a strong influence on their children and family members. It holds seminars, study weekends, and publishes articles in NBCW's newspaper, *Omnibus*. It has recently published a leaflet titled: *Strangers of Friends? Women Speaking to Women of Other Faiths*. Further information from Angela Perkins at: [enquiries@nbcw.org](mailto:enquiries@nbcw.org)

**Ecumenical discussion group, Dorking.** This is a group which began as an ecumenical discussion group involving Quakers and other Christians and developed to include Muslim women in 2005 after the bombings in London. It is a place for those who attend to learn about other faiths and offer friendship to members of other faiths. There are shared meals and discussions on faith and current issues. Further information from Anne King at: [anne@dorking.quaker.eu.org](mailto:anne@dorking.quaker.eu.org)

**Edinburgh Women's Inter Faith Group.** The group was founded in 2005 to enable women of different faiths to learn from each other about their faith and belief; bring and share individual experiences; and to listen to each other's faith stories. Its activities include shared meals and discussion groups. Currently, women of Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Brahma Kumari backgrounds are involved. Further information from Janice Clark at: [clark.janice@gmail.com](mailto:clark.janice@gmail.com)

**Faith Awareness – inter faith programme of Christians Aware.** Christians Aware is an international and ecumenical movement, which describes itself as aiming to develop multi-cultural understanding, raising awareness of the gifts and needs of God's people everywhere. Its Faith Awareness Programme began in 1996 and helps people meet each other, to develop friendships and understandings of each other and their faiths and to share this with others. Activities for women include shared meals, and discussions on faith and current issues. Women from the Baha'i, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh faiths are currently involved in these. The programme published *Faith Offerings* in 2005 which comprises prayers and stories for many occasions from Leicester Women for Inter Faith Understanding. Further information from Barbara Butler at: [barbarabutler@christiansaware.co.uk](mailto:barbarabutler@christiansaware.co.uk)

**Ghar-se-Ghar (Home-to-Home) Asian and Ethnic Minorities Women's Group, Luton.** Ghar-se-Ghar is a co-operative partnership between women of different faiths which aims to support women by focusing on health issues. The initiative was set up in 1994 and has been recognised as a co-op since May 2005. Its women only activities include exercise classes, talks and discussions on health issues and walk-in health centres in partnership with health professionals. Women of a number of Christian, Hindu, and Muslim backgrounds are among those who use its services. Further information from Ann Hyde at: [Agrassrootsp@aol.com](mailto:Agrassrootsp@aol.com)

**Huddersfield Interfaith Council women's inter faith initiative.** Huddersfield Inter Faith Council is a local inter faith body which brings people of different faiths together to share common concerns and learn more about each other. In March 2006, it held a one-off event called 'Women's Day' and it plans to organise two women's only events each year. Further information from Robin Bowles at: [cara@cooptel.net](mailto:cara@cooptel.net)

**Hyndburn Women's Forum.** The Forum was started in 1997. It is a partnership of community groups and members of the public who work together to put on events to celebrate International Women's Day and to promote awareness of issues relating to women. Further information from Gayle Knight at: [info@mediatricks-online.co.uk](mailto:info@mediatricks-online.co.uk)

**Interfaith Liaison Team – Diocese of Chichester.** The Diocese of Chichester is a diocese of the Church of England. Its Interfaith Liaison Team promotes inter faith dialogue and collaboration of faith groups in service to their communities (<http://mission.diochi.org.uk/content/070interfaith/010main.htm>). It has just started local women's dialogue and there are plans to hold a social gathering once a year involving Jewish, Christian and Muslim women, develop an e-mail exchange of women involved in inter faith dialogue that would provide a forum in which to discuss some of the ethical and cultural difficulties they face, and set up an international initiative between Christians in Britain and a women's Muslim seminary in Qum, Iran. Further information from Bonnie Evans-Hills at: [bonnie.evans-hills@diochi.org.uk](mailto:bonnie.evans-hills@diochi.org.uk)

**Interfaith MK, Women's Interfaith Lecture Series.** Interfaith MK is a local inter faith body which grew out of a multi-faith discussion group, taking its present form around 1990. Its chief objectives have always been



to sustain good relations between different religious and ethnic communities in Milton Keynes, provide a forum for exchange of information and views and give a voice to the faith communities in the affairs of the city. In 2005 planning started for a women's initiative to build networks and friendships among women of faith in the city; increase confidence among women of faith; and build the women's membership of Interfaith Milton Keynes. This has begun with an inter faith lecture series to offer role models of women speaking and leading discussion in matters of faith. This took place in summer 2006 with five lectures on the subject of women and faith under the title Different Paths: Women's Journeys of Faiths. The texts of the talks can be found at [www.mkweb.co.uk/religion/home.asp?r=36483](http://www.mkweb.co.uk/religion/home.asp?r=36483) Further information from Maggie Greaves at: [maggie.greaves@mac.com](mailto:maggie.greaves@mac.com)

**Interfaith Women's Group, Touchstone Centre, Bradford.** The Touchstone Centre is the base for Touchstone, a 'Methodist presence' in Bradford which has been working since 1989 to serve Methodists and the wider Christian church in its work with communities across Bradford and West Yorkshire ([www.touchstone-bradford.org.uk](http://www.touchstone-bradford.org.uk)). Its work includes a 'Faith to Faith Project' promoting inter faith understanding. The Interfaith Women's Group was started in 2003 to help build and develop good relations between Christian and Muslim women with the aims of enhancing religious and cultural literacy; improving community relations; celebrating difference; and working together on peace initiatives. They hold discussion groups on religious and cultural issues, celebration of religious and social events, days out/picnics and study tours. Special inter faith activities are also organised to include women from other faiths not mentioned above, while some events also involve men. Further information from Awais Dominic at: [awaisdom@hotmail.com](mailto:awaisdom@hotmail.com) or [faith2faith@touchstone-bradford.org.uk](mailto:faith2faith@touchstone-bradford.org.uk)

**Keighley Women and Girls' Interfaith Group – One Voice.** Keighley Interfaith Group began in 2000 to bring together, as friends, people of different faiths and for members to talk about their faiths to each other. It has continued with meetings for peace and friendship and an annual walk for friendship to at least two places of worship of different faiths. The girls and women asked to meet separately and began to do so shortly after the bombings in London in 2005, holding women only discussion groups and presentations on faith and social issues and shared meals. Further information from Margaret J Burton at: [lewisburton@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:lewisburton@blueyonder.co.uk)

**Leicester Christian-Muslim Women's Group.** The Group began in 2002 to enable women of the Christian and Muslim faiths to explore aspects of each other's beliefs and practices and to form friendships across frontiers. It holds discussion meetings on religious topics and social issues, social gatherings, and has shared meals. The women also work on fundraising projects. Most activities are for women but a few include men. Further information from: Revd Diane Johnston at: [grahamanddiane@ntlworld.com](mailto:grahamanddiane@ntlworld.com) and a longer description of this project appears on the Inter Faith Network's website at: [www.interfaith.org.uk/local/women.htm](http://www.interfaith.org.uk/local/women.htm)

**Living History (North East) Limited – Building Bridges of Understanding project.** Living History North East is a centre, started in 1995, which uses oral history to identify and record cultural changes throughout the region. Building Bridges of Understanding is an intergenerational inter faith project which is bringing together people of different generations, faiths (Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh) and backgrounds to experience recording and documenting what others see as their faith and its impact on their lives. Further information from Janette Hilton at: [lhneltd@btconnect.com](mailto:lhneltd@btconnect.com)

**Merseyside Council of Faiths' women's inter faith initiative.** The Merseyside Council of Faiths has been operating since 2001 to promote good inter faith relations and to provide channels of communication with local authorities and other public bodies in its area. As part of its inter faith work it will be holding at least one meeting in 2006 for women of faith to listen and learn from each other. Further information from John Smith, MCF Development Officer, at: [mcf@liverpoolnetworkforchange.org](mailto:mcf@liverpoolnetworkforchange.org)

**Middlesbrough Council of Faiths, women's initiative.** Middlesbrough Council of Faiths was launched in February 2006 [www.middlesbroughfaiths.org.uk](http://www.middlesbroughfaiths.org.uk). MCF works with 30+ different elected faith representatives to promote inter faith understanding and respect and help local faith communities play a role in decision making through being the Faith Community Network in the voluntary/community sector of the Local Strategic Partnership. It has started its women's initiative to engage women in contacts with other faiths and with other cultures within their own faiths; understand their key concerns and enable them to work together to address those concerns; and to develop and promote socially cohesive activities and events to build bonds of friendship, respect and trust between the many different faith and cultural communities and groups. Further information from Sheelin Kilroy at: [sheelinkilroy@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:sheelinkilroy@yahoo.co.uk) or [Sheelin@middlesbroughfaiths.org.uk](mailto:Sheelin@middlesbroughfaiths.org.uk)

**MoJoW (Muslim and Jewish women), Cambridge University.** This dialogue group was started in 2003 to bring religiously-oriented Muslim and Jewish women together to meet and discuss important religious issues in a safe and controlled environment. The aim is to provide a forum for discussion which does not otherwise exist. It holds dialogue sessions looking at topics such as religious dietary requirements and *halacha* and *sharia*. It also arranges joint swimming sessions. Further information from: Rebecca Fischer at: [mojow@cujs.org](mailto:mojow@cujs.org)

**North London Collegiate School Interfaith Society.** North London Collegiate School is an independent day school for girls from the ages of 4 to 18 (<http://www.nlcs.org.uk>). The student inter faith group was set up in 2006 to promote understanding and communication between students of different faiths (currently Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, and Muslim). Its activities include talks and meetings. Further information from Harriet Lefton at: [harriet@lefton.eclipse.co.uk](mailto:harriet@lefton.eclipse.co.uk)

**Oldham Women's Inter Faith Network.** The Oldham Inter Faith Forum is a local inter faith body which was set up in 2002 to be a representative voice for faith communities in Oldham and to promote good inter faith relations. The Oldham Women's Inter Faith Network was started in 2003 to work in a complementary way and to be a way for women of faith in Oldham to gain understanding of, and mutual respect for each other; to reveal and explore the great potential that there is amongst women of faith and using this to work for the common good of all people in Oldham. Its activities include discussion meetings on religious topics and social issues, walks to parts of Oldham that do not have many other faiths, visits to places of worship, shared meals, and participation in educational events and exhibitions. Further information from Elizabeth Bailey at: [elizabethbailey1945@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:elizabethbailey1945@hotmail.co.uk)

**Pathway Project, Staffordshire.** Pathway Project is a women's domestic violence refuge and advice service which operates in Staffordshire ([www.pathway-project.co.uk](http://www.pathway-project.co.uk)). It is a Christian organisation founded in 1991 to work with women and children of any faith who have been abused in the home. It operates a 24-hour helpline, refuge accommodation, children's services, counselling and floating support and carries out a range of activities. Although it is not an 'inter faith' project it is used by women of different faiths and sees

the relationships which they build between one another as an important aspect of its work. Further information from Kathy Coe at: [kathyc3000@hotmail.com](mailto:kathyc3000@hotmail.com)

**Preston Faith Forum.** This local faith forum was started in 2000 to promote inter faith dialogue and cooperation to improve the lives of the citizens of Preston. It organises multi faith events, celebrates and participate in local faith initiatives, supports local faith communities, and acts as a faith consultative body for local and national faith, statutory and voluntary organisations. Planning has recently begun for an initiative to increase involvement of women of different faiths. Further information from Vijayanti Chauhan at: [umachauhan28@gmail.com](mailto:umachauhan28@gmail.com)

**Sacred Space, Birmingham.** The Sacred Space initiative was started in 2002. It organises social occasions where people of different faiths can enjoy a meal, listen to a speaker, ask questions and make friends. Some of its activities are specifically for women, such as a three day trip for Christian and Muslim women. Further information from Gill Day at: [theday@gofree.co.uk](mailto:theday@gofree.co.uk)

**Scottish Inter Faith Council women's initiative.** The Scottish Inter Faith Council came into being in 2003. Its work is wide-ranging, from providing information and advice on faith and inter faith issues to linking inter faith initiatives and promoting the engagement of faith communities in public life. A full description can be found at [www.interfaithscotland.org](http://www.interfaithscotland.org). Its women's inter faith initiative brings women from diverse traditions together to build friendships and to explore how they can work together for a more just and inclusive Scotland. Women only activities include annual inter faith seminars for women (which have taken place in public venues such as St Mungo's Museum of Religious Life and Art and the Scottish Parliament) and inter faith coffee mornings for women during Inter Faith Week (which takes place in Scotland each November). It is part of the work remit of the Development Officer (full time) of SIFC to work with women so the women's initiative is part of the overall development work. Further information from Dr Maureen Sier at: [Maureen@interfaithscotland.org](mailto:Maureen@interfaithscotland.org)

**Sikh Nari Manch UK.** Sikh Nari Manch UK is a Sikh faith based organisation, founded by Bibi Gurdev Kaur in 1998, open to all faiths ([www.sikhnarimanach.com/home.asp](http://www.sikhnarimanach.com/home.asp)). Its aims are to empower women from all ages and backgrounds; develop community cohesion through inter faith and intercultural work; inspire young people; and to preserve the past by popularising prominent Sikh female role models from past and present. It holds yoga and meditation classes for men and women, bilingual devotional meetings for families, confidence building workshops, spiritual retreats for women, and inter faith sponsored walks to raise money for local, national and international charities. The SNM organises annual inter faith events such as its 'Spiritual Weekend Retreat', 'Inter faith Mothers Day' and 'Multifaith Senior Citizens Luncheon' and participates in inter faith events organised by other organisations. SNM Choir sings devotional music in Punjabi and English both to build bridges and has performed at interfaith events at venues such as Royal Albert Hall, London, and Symphony Hall Birmingham. Further information from Bibi Gurdev Kaur at: [info@sikhnarimanach.com](mailto:info@sikhnarimanach.com)

**Society for Dialogue and Action, Women's Inter Faith Bridge-Building course.** The course is an initiative of the Society for Interfaith Dialogue and Action which works to promote better understanding of other faiths and to build bridges and make friendships. The Women's Inter Faith Bridge-Building was a 6-part course which ran from May to June, 2006. Further information from Dr Hoti at: [soc-interfaithdanda@lucy-cav.cam.ac.uk](mailto:soc-interfaithdanda@lucy-cav.cam.ac.uk)

**St Alban's Interfaith Women's Group.** The Group was founded in 2003 to be a friendship and discussion group for women of different faiths and to attract women who may not join in a mixed sex group. As well as discussions, it arranges visits to places of worship. A description of one of its visits can be found at [www.interfaith.org.uk/local/women.htm](http://www.interfaith.org.uk/local/women.htm) Further information from Mrs Ann Scorer at: [ann.scorer@fish.co.uk](mailto:ann.scorer@fish.co.uk)

**Thames Gateway Women's Multifaith Forum.** The Forum was founded in 2000 to be a partnership of women of diverse faith and culture working together to support family life and to influence development in the Kent Thameside area for the good of both communities and individuals. Its activities include coffee mornings, coach trips to local places of worship followed by a discussion, sharing days, meetings every six to eight weeks to plan events and discuss pertinent issues. Some events are just for women and some also involve men. Further information from Mrs Lesley Mills at: [jolecave@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:jolecave@hotmail.co.uk)

**The Salvation Army Centre, Hayes, Middlesex.** This Centre was started in 2004. It is a local initiative, but part of the international Salvation Army Church ([www1.salvationarmy.org.uk/uki/www\\_uki.nsf](http://www1.salvationarmy.org.uk/uki/www_uki.nsf)). It runs parent and toddler groups, an Age Concern project for BME elders, youth club, refugee groups, community meetings, Residents Association meetings, Housing Association meetings, educational courses and provides a place of welcome for all faiths and cultures to respect and learn from each other. Further information from Captain Jenny Dibsdall at: [jenny.dibsdall@salvationarmy.org](mailto:jenny.dibsdall@salvationarmy.org)

**Tinsley Green Community Café – Tinsley Parents and Children's Consortium.** Tinsley Parents and Children Consortium was set up in 1999 to address issues concerning general support for women and lack of childcare facilities. The TPCC now runs a 60 place childcare facility and works in conjunction with Sure Start. The Tinsley Green Community Café was set up in 2006 as part of a programme to revive local training and employment opportunities; promote health care training; and to provide a meeting place for the community. Women from the local Christian, Hindu, Muslim communities use the café and services. Further information from Sally Pearse at: [tpcc9@btconnect.com](mailto:tpcc9@btconnect.com)

**Women in Faith course, The Islamic Foundation.** The Islamic Foundation is a centre for education, training, research and publication which also works to build bridges between Muslims and non Muslims across the Britain and Europe. It has an Interfaith Unit which specialises in working with groups and organisations of varying faith backgrounds. A new one year course run over six weekends has been set up to provide Muslim women with the knowledge, confidence and skills required to get involved in inter faith work and to develop these skills much further by gaining an understanding of other faith and non faith communities in the UK and learning extensively about the issues faced by British Muslims today. The course will culminate in the launch of a Muslim women's network for inter faith work. Further information from Sughra Ahmed at: [sughra@islamic-foundation.org.uk](mailto:sughra@islamic-foundation.org.uk).

**Women of Faith Coalition.** The purpose of the Women of Faith Coalition meetings is to work together for the advancement of women, stressing the fundamental unity of thought in the love of God, from whichever faith they come, in the recognition that for women of faith, their religion is the bedrock of their lives which shapes their attitudes. The Women of Faith Group (its earlier name) was drawn together in the light of initial discussions at United Nations Sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women in New York, when it was realised that very little attention was being given to the impact of religion and spirituality in general; and of the observations in the "Global Framework", of the United Nations Beijing Platform for Action about

women and religion, women and the family, the barriers facing women, that cultural and religious differences exist and need to be better understood and that women play a critical role in the family. Its activities include meetings and seminars. Further information from Lois Hainsworth at: [lois.hainsworth@skyeset.co.uk](mailto:lois.hainsworth@skyeset.co.uk)

**Women's Inter Faith Dialogue (WIFD) Group of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland's Commission for Inter Faith Relations (CCIFR).** CTBI is the ecumenical structure which keeps the various Christian Churches in touch; networks specialists across the churches; arranges regular meetings of Church Representatives; and links the Churches to a wide range of inter-church organizations. It has a Commission on Inter Faith Relations which is a point of reference in the churches for faith-to-faith encounter; facilitates a network of information and experience among Christians about inter faith relations; and enables critical reflection on the religiously and socially plural society of these islands. Since 1994 CCIFR has had a Women's Inter Faith Dialogue Group which brings women of a number of faiths together to learn from one another and discuss issues of shared concern. It usually meets twice a year at faith community venues to discuss news and inter faith initiatives and to listen to speakers on local and national issues and also tries to meet once a year at a faith centre (non-Christian) to meet women, and sometimes men, from that community to learn of their experiences. Further information from Margaret Jepson, Tel: 020 8886 4725.

**Women's Interfaith Media Awareness Project of the National Board of Catholic Women.** This is an initiative of the National Board of Catholic Women (see above at Ecumenical and Interfaith Standing Committee of the National Board of Catholic Women). It has been set up to develop an accessible web-based, inter faith focal point for media literacy (which will be facilitating initiatives and disseminating media literacy resources and expertise) and to increase knowledge and awareness among women of faith about the role and impact of the media in their own lives and those of their families, giving them the confidence to work together and express their views on media issues; and to facilitate coordinated collaboration between women in faith communities through the establishment of a national coalition for action on media issues. Further information from Angela Perkins at: [enquiries@nbcw.org](mailto:enquiries@nbcw.org)

**Women's Interfaith Network (London).** The Women's Interfaith Network was founded in 2003 to bring women of different faiths together to work to overcome prejudice in communities and help people accept life's rich tapestry of cultures; to provide a supportive ground for communication; and to help form a united voice that will connect women of different faiths ([www.wominet.co.uk](http://www.wominet.co.uk)). It has held a number of music and food festivals and seminars and has set up local women's inter faith network groups in a number of areas in London. Further information from Marion Waraguru at: [win@minervapl.co.uk](mailto:win@minervapl.co.uk)

**Women's Peace Meeting, Birmingham.** The Women's Peace Meeting began in 1993. While the impetus for the Peace Meeting came from a member of one tradition (the Unification Church), the core group of women who meet on a regular basis are from several different faiths. Their aims are: "to come together specifically as women, going beyond our differences, to discover the same heart with in each one; to try and break down barriers, overcome fear and prejudice, get to know one another and build trust and lasting friendships; to look at our different faiths and cultures through the eyes of a friend." The group have worked on helping refugees, emergency fundraising and fundraising for an inter faith Children's Home in India, and an inter faith Tapestry for Peace, as well as travelling on pilgrimage together. Further information from: Patricia Earle at: [davidearle@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:davidearle@blueyonder.co.uk)

## **Appendix 3 – Community Development Foundation (CDF): Planned survey of women in faith based communities receiving grants**

### **Survey of Women in Faith Based Communities Receiving Grants**

CDF has been commissioned by the Race, Cohesion and Faiths Directorate, part of the Department for Communities and Local Government, to run the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund.

The Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund supports faith and inter faith organisations to **strengthen their capacity (capacity building)** in order to play a fuller part in civil society/community cohesion. It will also support **inter faith activities** which bring together people from different faith groups to talk, network and learn from one another. The fund gives particular consideration to work that has a significant focus on women and/or young people.

Running alongside the fund is a comprehensive research and evaluation programme that reflects the key issues expressed above. As part of this research and evaluation CDF is conducting a **Survey of Women in Faith Based Communities Receiving Grants**.

Data will be collected from a sample of communities across England and Wales which contain communities that have received funding.

The **Survey of Women in Faith Based Communities Receiving Grants** will explore the following themes: the success of the Fund in meeting the needs of women; support and development needs; capacity building; inter faith working; community cohesion; shared citizenship; participation; and sustainability.

For **further information** on this, or any other, part of the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund research and evaluation, please visit our website [www.cdf.org.uk](http://www.cdf.org.uk) or contact Research Officer Malcolm James by email at [malcolm.james@cdf.org.uk](mailto:malcolm.james@cdf.org.uk) or by telephone on 020 7812 5453.



## Appendix 4 – Examples of flyers and web pages of women’s inter faith initiatives and activities

### Leicester Christian-Muslim Women’s Group Pamphlet



### The Muslim Christian Women's Group

#### The Muslim Christian Women's Group

*Background*

The group got together in May 2002, as a result of a friendship formed between Diane Johnson, the Priest at St Philip's Church, Evington Road, Habibe Yesilova of the Islamic Foundation, Markfield, and Naila Ahmed, at that time, Head of R.E. at Lutterworth Grammar School. At the start, the members were mainly drawn from the Monday Break Group of Great Bowden Parish Church (where Diane had formerly worked as a priest), the Al Noor Ladies' Group from Highfields, and the Women's Circle (Halaqah) of the Islamic Society of Britain, Leicester. As time has gone by, many others have become involved.

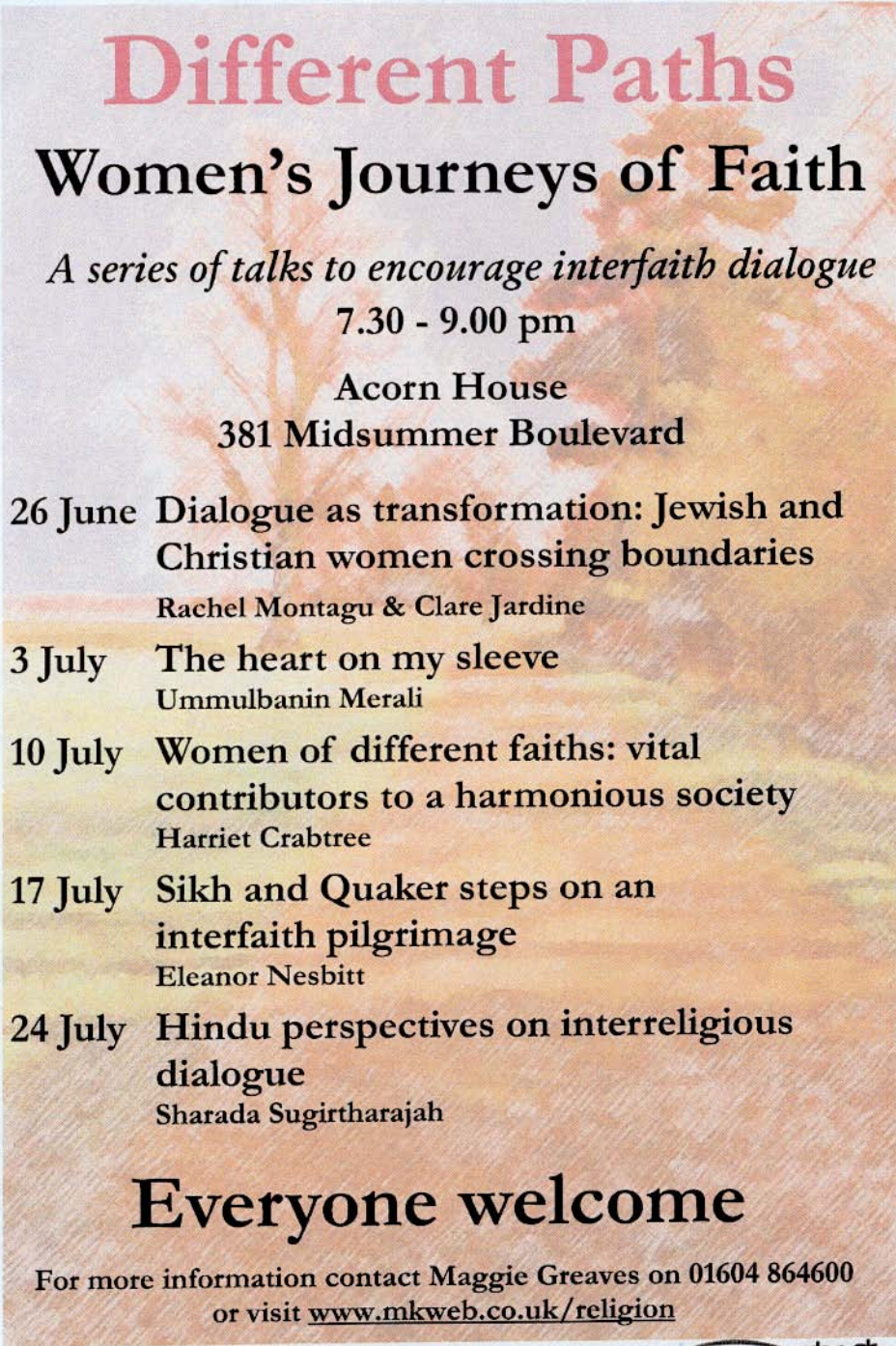
The group was conceived primarily as a way of getting to know one another, and learning about one another's faith. We agreed at the outset that, while the Christians would like the Muslims to be Christian, and the Muslims would like the Christians to be Muslim, this is not the purpose of our dialogue. So we start from where we are - people of different faiths but people of Faith in one God, holy women, ready to listen to each other without necessarily agreeing with each other, but nevertheless finding that we have many concerns in common, and that we can be friends. We do not try to convert one another.

informal, and we rarely complete everything on the agenda, because we talk together so much! We also support the Women's Welcome Project, collecting clothes and toiletries for women asylum seekers and their children. During the evening, we pray together. Those who find this uncomfortable can opt out, but so far, no-one has. We also have a favourite reading from both the Bible and the Qur'an, chosen by one of each faith group, who explains why this passage is important for her. We always have a time for refreshments, and in many ways this is the most important time, for people mix and make individual friendships. We also have a party with our children once a year in the summer.

We ask for £5 a year to help with expenses (postage, stationery, duplicating and refreshments).

If you are in sympathy with the aims of the group and interested in coming along to one of these meetings, please contact

**Diane Johnson on 0116 212 1273, or  
Naila Ahmed 0116 262 7517.**



# Different Paths

## Women's Journeys of Faith

*A series of talks to encourage interfaith dialogue*

7.30 - 9.00 pm

Acorn House  
381 Midsummer Boulevard

26 June Dialogue as transformation: Jewish and Christian women crossing boundaries  
Rachel Montagu & Clare Jardine

3 July The heart on my sleeve  
Ummulbanin Merali


10 July Women of different faiths: vital contributors to a harmonious society  
Harriet Crabtree

17 July Sikh and Quaker steps on an interfaith pilgrimage  
Eleanor Nesbitt

24 July Hindu perspectives on interreligious dialogue  
Sharada Sugirtharajah

### Everyone welcome

For more information contact Maggie Greaves on 01604 864600  
or visit [www.mkweb.co.uk/religion](http://www.mkweb.co.uk/religion)

Organised by Interfaith MK with support from the Home Office 



# Women in Faith

- » Are you a Muslim woman who is interested in building links with people of other faiths?
- » Can you help to bring communities together?
- » Would you like to be part of a network of Muslims who are involved in interfaith work?
- » Do you want to increase your confidence and improve your communication skills through professional training?
- » Would you like to enhance your CV?

Good interfaith relations are essential for a harmonious society. If you would like to get involved with interfaith work, or you are already active in working with people of different faiths and want to develop this further, this course will help you by providing the knowledge, confidence and skills you need to succeed.

The course, starting in July 2006, will be run over six short weekends throughout the period of one year and will lead to the launch of a Muslim women's network for interfaith work. You will be awarded a certificate from the Islamic Foundation which is recognised as a leading institution in interfaith activity.

The course will include coverage of:

- » Awareness and understanding of other faiths in the UK
- » Understanding of the key challenges that British Muslims face
- » Leadership skills
- » Confidence building
- » Communication skills
- » Work-life balance
- » How to set up interfaith projects



*Places are very limited and will be allocated on the basis of selection. If you would like to find out more about the course and how to apply for a place, please contact us:*



**Sughra Ahmed**, The Islamic Foundation, Ratby Lane, Markfield,  
Leicestershire, LE67 9SY. Tel: 01530 244944, ext 222 Fax: 01530 244946  
Email: [sughra@islamic-foundation.org.uk](mailto:sughra@islamic-foundation.org.uk) Website: [www.islamic-foundation.org.uk](http://www.islamic-foundation.org.uk)

## ***Building Bridges Course – The Society for Dialogue and Action***

### ***The Society for Dialogue and Action***

**which aims to promote understanding through dialogue and positive (inter)action  
invites ALL WOMEN to an inspiring and enjoyable lunch-discussion to make lasting  
friendships across perceived boundaries and build bridges.**

# **BUILDING BRIDGES**

## **Lunch Inter-Faith Discussion Group for Women 2006**

After 9/11, there is no better time than now to understand the connectedness between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. The Society for Dialogue and Action is pleased to present a series of topical, exciting, insightful, and dynamic informal talks and workshops for women of all backgrounds to promote friendship and understanding. The classes are supported by the CDF and Community Development, Cambridge City Council, and provide a safe and comfortable environment for women—the mothers and leaders of society—to reach out to one another to promote dialogue and engage in positive (inter)action. Discussion period will be held over lunch (lunch provided).

ALL SESSIONS WILL BE ON WEDNESDAYS BETWEEN 12.45 – 2.00 p.m.

Week 1. 24th May. Visit to the Cambridge Synagogue (please meet at Lucy Cavendish College Porter's lodge, Lady Margaret Rd, Cambridge just before 12.45).

Wk 2. 31st May. Talk by Dr. Diana Lipton on Conflicts of Interests: What can we learn from Delilah (Judges 16) about **women and war?** at Lucy Cavendish College. Talk followed by light lunch.

Wk 3. 7th June. Visit to Great St Mary's Church; talk by Rev. Andreas: **The Church: its symbols and meanings against a historical background.** Lunch at Michael House.

Wk 4. 14th June. Talk by Sarah Snyder: Have we—the Children of Abraham—lost our sense of hospitality? Followed by light lunch.

Wk 5. 21st June. A visit to the Mosque, talk by Bosnian Sheikh Sajjad. Light Lunch.

Wk 6. 28th June. Sheridan James: *Sulh-e-Qul*: Peace for all in Islam? Followed by Lunch

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION PLEASE CALL 01223 764144**

Society for Dialogue and Action, at Lucy Cavendish College, Lady Margaret Road, Cambridge CB3 0BU.  
Tel: 01223 764144; email: [soc-interfaith@lucy-cav.cam.ac.uk](mailto:soc-interfaith@lucy-cav.cam.ac.uk)

## Women's Interfaith Network (WIN) Web Page





## *Residential Weekend for Women - 30 June- 2 July 2006*

### Summer Residential

80 – 100 ladies from different age groups and backgrounds are taking part in a residential camp especially organised for the women only to raise their self-esteem, and support their physical, mental and spiritual needs. It will bridge the generation gap, and break the barriers amongst different faiths. Apart from walks in the hills, yoga and Tai Chi, there would be group discussions, lectures, workshops, information, counselling, talent shows and meditation

Participants from Glasgow, North London, Slough, Coventry, Manchester, Banbury, Wolverhampton, Birmingham & more will gather at:

**Billberry Hill Residential Centre,  
Rose Hill, Rednal, Birmingham,  
B45 8RT  
0121 453 4677**

**Organised by Sikh Nari Manch**

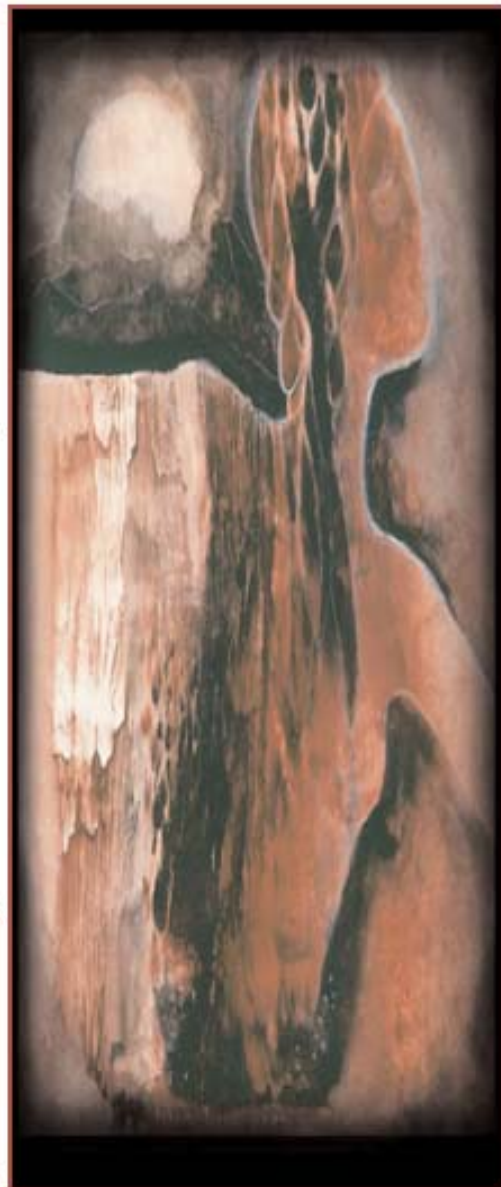
**Further Info: Bibi Gurdev Kaur**

**0121 351 5191 / 0121 377 6136**

**07888 734273**

**MATA TRIPTA HOUSE**

**176 Streetly Road, Erdington Birmingham  
B23 7AL**



## Pamphlet Titled Strangers or Friends? Women Speaking to Women of Other Faiths – NBCW

### Useful Contacts

**Committee for Other Faiths**  
Catholic Bishops' Conference  
39 Eccleston Square  
London SW1V 1BX  
[www.catholic-ew.org.uk/interfaith.htm](http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/interfaith.htm)  
(An arm of the Bishops Conference. Publishes leaflets on other faiths)

**Interfaith Network for the UK**  
8A Lower Grosvenor Place  
London SW1W 0EN  
[www.interfaith.org.uk](http://www.interfaith.org.uk)  
(Provides information on local interfaith organisations and meetings)

**Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education**  
Church House,  
Great Smith Street  
London SW1P 3NZ  
[www.support4learning.org.uk/shap](http://www.support4learning.org.uk/shap)  
(Provides calendars of festivals)

**Women's Interfaith Network**  
42 Wigmore Street  
London W1U 2RY  
[www.wominet.co.uk](http://www.wominet.co.uk)  
(Helps women to establish local interfaith groups by providing advice and information)

**Women of Faith Coalition**  
Grey Lodge  
London Road  
Stroud GL5 2AT  
(Brings together women of faith involved in international meetings)

If you have had any experience of Interfaith Dialogue and would like to share it or would like further information please contact:  
**Angela Perkins**  
(Development Officer NBCW)  
01642 791840  
[enquiries@nbcw.org](mailto:enquiries@nbcw.org)

### Christianity

"...we wish to listen to one another, we believe that this itself is already a sign of peace."  
Pope John Paul II, at Interfaith Meeting, Assisi, 24th January 2002

**Baha'i**  
"Let them purify their sight and behold all humankind as leaves and blossoms and fruits of the tree of being"  
Abdul Baha

**Buddhism**  
"Just as a mother would protect her only child with her life, even so let one cultivate a boundless love towards all beings"  
Khudaka Patha, from the Metta Sutta

**Hinduism**  
"Thank you Lord, for the grace which has made me realize that every being is an abode of God, worthy of respect and reverence"  
Hindu Scriptures

**Islam**  
"Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily to him will we give a new life".  
Surah 126 An-Nahl:97 The Holy Quran 683

**Jainism**  
"I forgive all living beings, let all living beings forgive me; all in this world are my friends. I have no enemies".  
Kshamapna Sutra

**Sikhism**  
"No one is my enemy and no one is a stranger. I get along with everyone."  
Sri Guru Granth Sahib

**Zoroastrianism**  
"That nature only is good when it shall not do unto another what ever is not good for its own self"  
Dadistan -1 Dinik 94.5

**NBCW**  
National Board of Catholic Women  
Consultative Body to Bishops Conference of England and Wales

Produced by  
The Ecumenical & Interfaith Committee of NBCW

## Strangers or Friends?

## Women Speaking to Women of Other faiths

# Interfaith Dialogue

## Interfaith or InterReligious dialogue is different from Ecumenism

**In Interfaith Dialogue**

- We seek to encounter, understand and relate to **people of other faiths**.
- In these encounters we recognize there are shared values and insights as well as differences.
- We welcome opportunities of working together for the common good.
- We engage in this dialogue from the basis of our Christian faith. It is an aspect of living the Gospel and witnessing to it.

**Whereas in Ecumenical dialogue**  
We share, pray and work together with **people of different Christian denominations**.

### On an Interfaith Journey we come across barriers

Nothing in Common

Rather not get involved

Our faith will be challenged

Don't want to look foolish

**We are all women of faith**

### When the barriers are lifted what steps can we take?

**Smile**  
Say "Hello"  
**Stop for a chat**  
Find out about festivals  
**Send a card**  
Share Concerns  
**Share a meal**  
Get to know and trust each other

**But don't be discouraged this will take time**

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