

The Possible Closure of the Inter Faith Network:

A Personal Reflection on the Importance of Inter Faith Work

Although I had been drawn to inter faith work since I was a theological student, it wasn't until February 2001 that I began to work in this area as part of a remunerated role. I joined the ecumenical clergy team at St. Anne's and St. Andrews Brondesbury and the London Inter Faith Centre and very soon, working alongside its inspirational founder Fergus Capie, I was involved in a variety of inter faith initiatives in one of the most diverse and religiously vibrant parts of West London. Some of the early lessons that I learned there was that communication (the essential quality of dialogue) was not a straightforward matter. This is because religion and culture strongly inform the way we view the world and for most of us that is inculcated when we are born because we are all born in a context and fashioned by it. In a context of diversity we have to do business with one another and the different ways we view reality. Another lesson learned was that even though I come from a Northern English working-class background, when it comes to working with other religious communities I am part of a privileged community being an ordained, white man in a Christian denomination with a missionary past which in so many ways informs the way I look at the world culturally, politically and theologically. And then another lesson was that one can be enriched in one's own faith by encounters with people who are different and see the world differently. That has helped make me a better Christian.

Although new relationships were being formed at that time, they were soon to be challenged and by the terror attacks of 9/11. The need for faiths to come together had already received a firm foundation and this was so critically important with so much fear and mistrust around. In the aftermath of 9/11 there were difficult conversations that needed to be had, older relationships needed to be preserved and new ones formed.

At the same time, I was also the minister to a congregation who worshipped in the same building as the Inter Faith Centre and who had made it clear at the time of my appointment that they were not in sympathy with the aims of the inter faith work! So, at one and the same time I was striving to work with people of other faiths in a very challenging environment while still being rooted in the liturgical and pastoral requirements of Christian vocation to minister within this small worshipping community. Thus, we all are treading uncertain territory – striving to be faithful to one's own tradition and identity (which is also involving) and being genuinely open to others.

I share this part of my story at a time when the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom is facing likely closure and this development has led me to reflect upon my own work in inter faith and what has helped facilitate that relationship building. In the face of cultural and religious diversity it would be irresponsible to imagine that mutual respect, tolerance and cooperation can happen without any intentionality and resourcing or any awareness of our own story and what has brought us to our own place in our respective faith and religious identities. This work cannot be measured in immediate outcomes, unique website visitors or eye-catching events, but is a truly generational task.

The inter faith work that was pioneered in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to rising levels of racism in society was at the time a very hard sell to many within the churches and in other faith traditions and has often been regarded by many outside the inter faith movement as having a whiff of naivety and sentimentality about it. It is easy to dismiss it as "tea and samosas", "world peace by breakfast" or being the "useful idiots" of those who are seeking to impose their own religious agenda on wider society. But having said all that I recall one of the most visible symbols of the importance of inter faith work shortly after 9/11 was when in many communities, churches and mosques displayed on doors and noticeboards the joint statement by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and the Muslim Council of Britain that denounced the violence, pledged to stand together, and to pray for the victims of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In those communities anyone who passed by and read them would have known that there was alternative religious narrative other than the prevailing one presented in the media or by politicians, that Christians, Muslims and people of many faiths were actively pursuing together the well-being of society through dialogue and cooperation.

But this cooperation does not happen by accident and needs to be carefully nurtured through adequate resourcing in order to make those conversations happen between faith communities. The progress that has

been made in Jewish-Christian relations over more than half a century in the United Kingdom would not have happened had it not been for the existence of the Council of Christians and Jews that was initially championed by the Chief Rabbi and the Archbishop of Canterbury during the darkest chapter in 20th century Europe and also having received the patronage of the late Queen Elizabeth II. And throughout many conversations had with people in different parts of the world, it is evident that the UK has held an enviable place pioneering much inter faith work especially at local level and this has been due in no small part to the existence of the Inter Faith Network for the UK (IFN) who have helped facilitate relationships between different faiths through some very difficult and volatile times. Its very existence has created an atmosphere of hope and provided the encouragement for others to pursue mutual understanding and cooperation.

IFN in part grew out of the pioneering work of the British Council of Churches in the area of inter faith relations under the leadership of Kenneth Cracknell and the then Bishop of Guildford David Brown. And much of that work was possible because there was already the goodwill and expertise of former missionaries who had many years' experiences of ministering in a religiously plural environment and who brought home with them important and profound insights that helped build inter faith work in diverse contexts such as Bradford, Birmingham, Leicester, and Southall. Perhaps the time has come for a more thorough telling of the inter faith story in these islands from the standpoint of the Christian ecumenical movement? Certainly, that story would include some important milestones and challenging times which have included Enoch Powell's famous rivers of blood speech, public controversy over the restriction of Sikh turbans, the Salman Rushdie affair, disturbances in English northern towns such as Bradford, Burnley and Oldham (2001 leading to the Cantle Report), 9/11, 7/7, the Iraq War and the Israel Palestine conflict. At the present time, the latter of those conflicts has seriously destabilised civic space to the extent that legitimate protest and freedom of speech have provided cover for unacceptable hate speech against Muslims and Jews. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Israel-Gaza war placed a strain on inter faith relations in these islands, and how safe minority communities feel within civic space should be an absolute priority for government at this time. In taking that important work forward it is always best to work with different communities and IFN has provided a vital means for that to happen.

Yet, whilst IFN is but one organisation amongst many who have contributed to inter faith cooperation, the *instrumental nature* of IFN and its ability to broker relationships in the public square has been one of the most noticeable realities of the last 30 years or more. If it were to close this will almost certainly send out a signal that such work is not valued or worthy of public support. That this organisation looks set to disappear from the civic landscape should be a matter of grave concern to anyone who values the dignity, security and well-being of all. The hope lies in the continuing support of inter faith work in the devolved nations and there seems (as yet) no indication that the Parliaments in Cardiff and Edinburgh abandoning their support for inter faith work. Perhaps they can offer important models for future engagement, but it cannot be denied that if IFN disappears, the task of social cohesion will be all the more difficult to nurture and grow.

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